



**Leadership for Inclusive Special Education in Irish
Primary Schools: An Exploration of the Role of the Special
Educational Needs Coordinator**

by

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Abstract

As the educational landscape rapidly transforms in response to the promotion of inclusive education agendas, it has brought challenges to the management and leadership of provision for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). The role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), the person responsible for managing and leading SEN in the primary school setting is not defined in Ireland and research relevant to the role is scarce. This research applied Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory, and positioned special education within Hornby's Inclusive Special Education Framework, to explore SENCOs' and Principals' perspectives on the role, and to identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for their professional learning in primary schools in Ireland.

A two-phase mixed methods sequential explanatory research design (QUAL+quan) was adopted for the study. Phase One involved a large-scale national survey of SENCOs in Irish primary schools ($n=371$). Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data from Phase One. Phase Two was informed by findings from Phase One and involved semi-structured interviews ($n=9$) with SENCOs, SENCO Principals, and Principals to undertake an in-depth exploration of the realities, experiences and challenges of the SENCO role in Ireland. Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

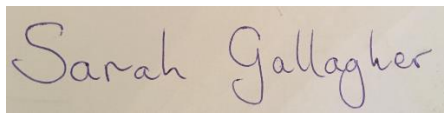
Findings from Phase One provide insight into the profiles of SENCOs in Irish primary schools. They pointed to experienced SENCOs who for the majority held a post of responsibility related to the SENCO role (72.6%). Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis from Phase Two. These themes indicated that SENCOs are leading and managing school-wide collaborative approaches to SEN provision; are experienced, knowledgeable, connected and enabled by supportive staff and Principals and a culture of collaboration; and that the extensive nebulous nature of the SENCO role has evolved in a policy vacuum with insufficient time and inadequate support from external professional services. The thematic analysis also provided insights from the Principals and SENCOs on the future directions of the role.

In summary, SENCOs are leading SEN provision through collaborative and distributed approaches across the school microsystem. It was evident that SENCOs are acting as advocacy leaders, pedagogical leads and mediators of change. While a large percentage have a SEN specific qualification and a post of responsibility, potentially more support is needed from policy makers and teacher educators to ensure that SENCOs have appropriate professional learning available to them and that the role is assigned a relevant and formalised post of responsibility. Various enablers and barriers to SENCO role enactment were identified when framed by Bioecological Systems Theory. The SENCO role operates at the centre of the Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory and is impacted by changes over time (chronosystem) from the various levels of the system, such as policy changes from the macrosystem and exosystem. The findings may provide an important evidence base to underpin and inform the evolution of policy and practice for the SENCO role in Irish primary schools.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, by me or any other person, for the purpose of obtaining any other qualification.

Signed:

A rectangular image showing a handwritten signature in purple ink on a light-colored background. The signature reads "Sarah Gallagher" in a cursive script.

Sarah Gallagher

Date: 9/5/2024

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List of Acronyms

CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DE	Department of Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EASNIE	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs
GAM	General Allocation Model
HSE	Health Service Executive
IEP	Individual Education Plan
ILSA	Irish Learning Support Association
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
MIC	Mary Immaculate College
NASENCo	National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordinator
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PDL	Professional Development and Learning
PLC	Professional Learning Community
PoR	Post of Responsibility
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities
SENO	Special Educational Needs Organiser
SERC	Special Education Review Committee
SET	Special Education Teacher
SETAM	Special Education Teacher Allocation Model

SLT	Senior Leadership Team
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Glossary of Terms

Assistant Principal 1/ Assistant Principal 2 Posts: These AP1 and AP2 posts are posts of responsibility within Irish primary schools and are part of a school's leadership and management structure. These posts are in addition to the posts of Principal and Deputy Principal. AP1 and AP2 posts are filled by the schools themselves and additional payment is made for recipients of these posts. AP1 and AP2 can be viewed as middle leadership/ management posts.

DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is an integrated approach by the Department of Education to the issue of educational inclusion and 'was designed to give tailored support to schools who have a high concentration of disadvantage' (DES 2017c, p.4). It aims to provide better opportunities for those in communities where there is a risk of disadvantage and social exclusion (DEIS 2017c).

NCSE: Established in 2003, this statutory body was set up to improve the delivery services to persons with special educational needs and has a particular focus on children. The NCSE deliver their service on a local level primarily through the NCSE's national network of Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs).

Oide: Support service for school leaders and teachers, which was launched on September 1st 2023 and was formed from the integration of four previous existing support services.

SET: Special education teachers provide additional teaching and support for pupils with SEN in various ways, such as assessing and recording the child's needs and progress; setting specific, time-related targets; teaching the pupils in the child's classroom or a separate room; advising class teachers on differentiation; meeting with and advising parents; and meeting other professionals and visiting teachers (NCSE n.d.).

SENCO: The Special Educational Needs Coordinator is the person in the school who is responsible for the coordination of SEN provision.

SENO: The Special Educational Needs Officer is employed by the NCSE to deliver the services of the NCSE at a local level. There is a national network of SENOs and each SENO has responsibility for certain schools within their geographical area.

SNA: Special Needs Assistants assist the teacher and play an important role in supporting pupils with SEN who have substantial care needs.

NEPS: The National Educational Psychological Service, which was established in 1999 by the Department of Education and Science, provides psychologists to work with schools and are concerned with learning, social and emotional behaviour. Each psychologist within NEPS is assigned to a group of schools and they work with teachers, parents and children in identifying educational needs (Government of Ireland n.d.).

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

In Ireland, as the educational landscape rapidly transforms in response to the promotion of inclusive education agendas, it has brought changes to the management and leadership of provision for pupils with special educational needs (SEN). The policy landscape in Ireland is influenced by international discourse related to inclusion, such as Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD 2006). Article 24 commits countries to ensure that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system and are educated in their local schools alongside their peers (National Council for Special Education (NCSE) 2024). The UNCRPD is highly influential internationally and has been a catalyst for consultation around Ireland's development of inclusive education. The recent policy advice paper from the NCSE (2024), *An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society*, recommends a phased development of the progressive realisation of an inclusive education system in Ireland aligned to the relevant articles of the UNCRPD. In contrast to this, the current status quo in Ireland is reflective of a dual system of education with a mainstream education system and a special education system. The NCSE (2024) commented on the current situation and noted that the majority of stakeholders indicated their belief that Ireland needs to maintain a continuum of education provision that includes mainstream classes, special classes and special schools. Such a continuum of provision theoretically aligns to Hornby's (2015) theory of inclusive special education, which has the potential to facilitate an effective education for all children with SEN and disabilities (Hornby 2015). Inclusive special education may be viewed as an integrated response to a continuum of need and:

...is about providing the best possible instruction for all children with SEND (special educational needs and disabilities), in the most appropriate setting, throughout all stages of a child's education, with the aim of achieving the highest possible level of inclusion in the community post-school.

(Hornby 2015, p.247)

The Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) is often charged with the leadership and management of SEN provision within the primary school system.

In Ireland the SENCO can be the Principal, Deputy Principal or teacher. Best practice places the SENCO role ‘at the heart of the educational processes occurring within a setting, exerting an influence on teaching and learning for all’ (Hallett and Hallett 2017, p.2). The SENCO role can be viewed:

...as both an agent of change for individual pupils, and a change agent for schools; that is, it is both a process management role and a strategic management role. This would seem to place the SENCO at the centre of the school development process, able to meet the needs of all pupils, while providing a specialist focus for those with additional needs.

Hallett and Hallett (2010b, p.3)

The scope of the SENCO role, however, varies internationally and has undergone transformation and metamorphosed over time (Ekins 2015; Cowne *et al.* 2019) and continues to evolve in a state of flux (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). Within the existing empirical research on the SENCO role there is international consensus that the nature of the SENCO role is complex, challenging, contextually bound and multifaceted (Kearns 2005; Norwich 2010; Fitzgerald and Radford 2017; Curran and Boddison 2021; Lin *et al.* 2022). Internationally the SENCO role first emerged in 1994 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland with the implementation of the SEN Code of Practice (Department for Education (DfE) 1994). In this jurisdiction the SENCO role is a statutory role (Curran and Boddison, 2021) and thus is formalised, defined and remunerated (Abbott, 2007) with mandatory qualifications in place (Done *et al.* 2023). The SENCO role has experienced a paradigm shift in England since its formation, from a role focused on pedagogy and support for learners to a more strategic leadership role (Department for Education and Department of Health (DfE and DoH) 2015; Ekins 2015; Curran and Boddison 2021). Despite the formalisation of the role, historical challenges still pervade for the SENCO role in England and it remains disparate in practice due to local interpretations of national guidance (Curran and Boddison, 2021). Looking wider the SENCO role is also evident in international contexts, where the SENCO is key to the delivery of inclusive education, such as in Sweden (Klang *et al.* 2017), Finland (Takala *et al.* 2009), Greece (Agaliotis and Kalyva 2011), New Zealand (Lin *et al.* 2022), Hong Kong (Fong Poon-McBrayer 2012) and Ireland (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). Within many of these countries, the special education teacher (SET) often absorbs the SENCO responsibility due to their

expertise and position (Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023) rather than as a result of a formal recruitment process.

In Ireland the SENCO role, unlike England, has emerged in an ad hoc manner (O’Gorman and Drudy 2011; Fitzgerald and Radford 2017), it is not formally recognised and minimum policy guidance regarding the enactment of the role exists (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). Further, there has been a paradigmatic shift away from a psycho-medical approach to SEN provision to a model, the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (SETAM), which priorities a needs-based approach to resource allocation in schools (NCSE 2014; Department of Education and Skills (DES) 2017; Curtin and Egan 2021; Department of Education (DE) 2024). The resource allocation is based on the school profile, which considers factors such as outcomes of standardised testing in literacy and numeracy and whether the pupils are living in a disadvantaged area (DES 2017a; DE 2024). There is a focus within the education system on auditing of standardised assessment of pupil performance to profile schools. Through this model, school leaders have additional responsibility to identify pupils’ needs through school-based assessment and have autonomy to distribute the resources to pupils based on need (Kenny *et al.* 2020). The implications of this for school leaders and for SENCOs, include increased school autonomy and external accountability requirements, which subsequently increases school leader decision-making responsibilities (Kenny *et al.* 2020). For the SENCO, the implications include responsibility for assessment and profiling, student support planning, and partnerships with families and external agencies. This results in increased bureaucracy, workload, responsibility, professional learning needs, and an over-riding need to advocate for pupils with additional needs. All of this is in addition to full-time teaching and developing differentiated and sometimes individualised learning programmes. Despite changes in policy guidelines, the Irish system does not formally designate specific personnel to lead and coordinate school profiling, identification of need, implementation of tiered evidence-informed supports, and strategic development of the school inclusion plan. School profiling refers to the educational profile of the school and is underpinned by three pillars: ‘Enrolment Allocation’ (total number of pupils); ‘Educational Teaching Needs Profile’ (derived from the literacy and numeracy profile of the school as demonstrated by the standardised testing reported by the school); ‘Educational Disadvantage’ (pillar targets

support for pupils who are at risk of educational disadvantage) (DE 2024, p.4). At the Principal's discretion, a teacher may be designated to lead the school approach to inclusive and special education. No qualification in Special Education is required, nor will they necessarily have a formal leadership role in the school. Despite an emphasis on school-based profiling and the requisite skills, knowledge and competencies required to undertake profiling, the Irish system does not formally designate a position to this role. Unless aligned with formal senior and middle leadership structures in schools, the SENCO role can be viewed as operational as opposed to a senior leadership role in many schools (Burton and Goodman 2011; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023). Much of the empirical literature seeking to understand the SENCO role identifies an imperative to align it to the formal leadership structures in schools, and specifically senior leadership, to enable school-wide strategic development of inclusive provision (Agalotis and Kalyva 2011; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020; Lin *et al.* 2022) and to elevate the status assigned to special education and the SENCO (Layton 2005; Szwed 2007; O'Gorman and Drudy 2011; Oldham and Radford 2011; Fitzgerald and Radford 2017).

Without role recognition and guidance from the Department of Education, the SENCO role has emerged from the ground up in Irish primary schools and there is limited research to explore the realities, profile and status of these SENCOs. Colum and Mac Ruairc (2023) conducted a qualitative study on the role within Irish primary schools but this was a small-scale study with four SENCOs. There have been no large-scale studies on the SENCO role at primary level in Ireland and internationally there have been limited studies of this type. The first such studies in England only emerged in recent years, for example Dobson (2019) and Curran and Boddison (2021). Aligned to this, in-depth interview-based research that seeks the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as Principals, on the SENCO role has been lacking in the primary school context. This research, therefore, aims to address this research gap by exploring the realities of the SENCO role through a two-phased approach using a large-scale sample survey design and a semi-structured interview approach with SENCOs, SENCO Principals and Principals. In doing so, this research aims to explore SENCOs' and Principals' perspectives of the role, their current practices and implications for their professional learning.

1.1 Research Rationale

My initial stimulus for this research study stems from my extensive experience as a special education teacher (SET) in both special and primarily mainstream primary schools. I have 13 years lived experience as a SET, which has developed my commitment to ensure that pupils with SEN are provided with meaningful learning experiences. As a SET, it was evident to me that leadership of SEN provision is imperative at school level especially with the policy changes that have occurred over the last number of years. My inherent interest and my passion for learning about working with pupils with SEN led to me undertaking the *Postgraduate Diploma in Inclusive Special Education* in Mary Immaculate College in 2018/2019. This professional learning experience inspired my interest in the leadership of inclusive special education and highlighted to me the need for research on the role of the SENCO in leading inclusive special education in primary schools in Ireland. The knowledge gained from engaging with the postgraduate diploma developed my understanding of educational policy and the implications of policy on my teaching, pupils' experiences and on the leadership of SEN provision within schools. I was motivated, driven and inspired throughout the postgraduate to ask questions and seek answers in order to improve the experience of pupils with SEN in schools. This experience instilled in me the desire to make a further contribution to the area of leadership and I subsequently sought out this opportunity to complete this doctoral research. Through this research, I am passionately striving to address the gap in the research regarding the SENCO role in primary schools and to make a contribution on the leadership and management of SEN provision at school level and at policy level within the Irish context. This professional motivation was a key driver for me throughout the research process and it is a clear demonstration of the experiential lens that I bring to the study.

There has been significant transformation in Ireland over the past two decades regarding the provision of SEN (NCSE 2014, DES 2017a, DES 2017b, DE 2024) and recent policy advice from the NCSE could be an indication of further developments to come (NCSE 2024). As an example, there has been an increase in the number of special classes in the Irish primary school setting from 356 in 2010 to 1,807 in 2022 (NCSE 2023a). In particular the number of autism special classes has increased from 214 in 2010 to 1,463 in 2022 (NCSE 2023a). These policy shifts, driven at national

level from the government and Department of Education have implications for the leadership of SEN provision in Irish primary schools. Greater autonomy and responsibility are bestowed onto school leaders and SENCOs regarding the identification of needs and allocation of resources to meet these needs. Theoretically, the role of the SENCO as strategic leader for inclusive special education across the school setting is essential given this increased autonomy. However, research is lacking in Ireland on the people who actually are leading the SEN provision in schools (internationally for the most part this person is known as the SENCO). Research is needed on the exploration of the realities of this SENCO role in mainstream primary schools, especially in light of the changing educational landscape. Such research is warranted as an understanding is needed of the challenges that SENCOs are encountering in order to identify the professional learning needs and supports needed to allow SENCOs to effectively enact their role. A two-phased sequential approach employing a large-scale survey and qualitative interviews is timely to gain a wide, in-depth and rich insight into the lived experiences of SENCOs in Irish primary schools.

1.2 Research Aims and Questions

The aim of the research is to explore Irish SENCOs' and Principals' perspectives on the role of the SENCO, identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for their professional learning. The research questions were developed inductively and were influenced by the extant literature related to the inclusion and the inclusive special education landscape, the SENCO role, leadership and teacher professional learning. This literature was situated in the national and international domains. Mertens (2019) indicates that the literature review serves as a foundation for the formation of research questions and the operationalisation of the objectives of the research programme. These questions align with the overall aim of this programme of work and address identified research needs and gaps regarding the role of the SENCO in the primary school setting in Ireland. The research questions, which are addressed in Phase One and Two of this research, are as follows:

- What are the demographics and profile of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?

- What are the roles and responsibilities of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?
- What are the perceived enablers to enactment of the SENCO role?
- What are the perceived barriers to enactment of the SENCO role?
- What are the professional learning needs of SENCOs and supports needed to allow them to effectively enact their role?

1.3 Timeline of Research

An overview of the timeline of the study is illustrated in Figure 1.1. This figure gives the main steps that were involved in this research with the timeline of the key milestones identified.



Figure 1.1: PhD timeline.

1.4 Overview of Thesis

This thesis is presented in eight chapters. This current chapter has introduced the central concepts inherent to this study together with the research aims and questions.

A rationale for the study was provided which conveyed the significance of this research and the timeline for completion of this PhD was illustrated. Chapter Two presents a critical exploration of the literature related to inclusion and inclusive special education, the SENCO role, leadership and the SENCO role as well as professional learning and the SENCO role. These concepts are reviewed from a policy, national and international dimension.

In Chapter Three, the theoretical framework that was used as a guiding lens for this research is described with particular reference to the SENCO role. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory places the SENCO at the centre of the system and allowed for a broader analysis of the interconnecting factors which influence the SENCO role. Chapter Four outlines the methodological approaches used to collect the data related to the lived experiences of both SENCOs and Principals. The approaches used for Phase One and Two are detailed including a justification for the selected methodologies. The approach taken for the data analysis for both phases is detailed together with steps used to enhance the quality of the study. Ethical considerations and limitations associated with the research are noted.

Chapters Five and Six present the findings related to Phase One and Two respectively. The Phase One findings include the presentation of both the quantitative and qualitative data. These findings are outlined with reference to the research questions and information is detailed on how Phase One influenced the design of Phase Two. Chapter Six presents the findings pertaining to the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2020) of the interviews. Here, the lived experiences of SENCOs and Principals are thematically explored. Direct quotes from participants are provided in this chapter that evidence the themes that were derived from the thematic analysis process. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory frames the exploration of the factors influencing the SENCO role positioned within an inclusive special education approach to provision (Hornby 2015).

Chapter Seven provides a discussion of the findings from both phases. The findings from Phase One and Two are integrated and interpreted with reference to the extant literature and the theoretical framework. The research questions and themes derived from the data are used to structure this chapter. Finally, Chapter Eight provides the conclusion of the thesis and addresses the research questions and synthesises the

key findings. Implications of this research for policy, practice and further research directions are provided. Specifically, implications are documented that arose from the data, which can potentially support the recognition and further development of the SENCO role.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an introduction into the central concepts related to this research, as well as the rationale, aims and research questions of this study. The concepts of inclusion and inclusive special education were introduced as was the SENCO role from an international and national perspective. The literature related to these concepts and the SENCO role are further analysed and reviewed in the next chapter. A timeline for the research was depicted and the overview of each chapter was presented. The impetus for this research stems from my experience as a special education teacher in special and mainstream primary schools together with the need to garner large-scale, wide and in-depth insights into the realities, status and challenges faced by SENCOs in Irish primary schools. A central driver for this research was the importance of leadership for inclusive special education in Irish primary schools and the desire to identify the professional learning needs and supports needed for SENCOs to fulfil their role in a manner that optimises best outcomes for all.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter aims to critically explore the literature relating to the role of the SENCO in inclusive education systems. Based on a review of the literature, the four central themes that emerged, which will be presented are *Inclusion, Special Education and Inclusive Special Education; the Role of the SENCO in the Irish and International context; Leadership and the SENCO Role in Primary schools; Professional Learning and the SENCO Role*. The literature research will be situated within the wider national and international research and policy areas, as it is these contexts that inevitably influence practice and policy. There are many current drivers for inclusive education reform and these will be discussed. The UNCRPD, for example, is highly influential internationally and has been a catalyst for consultation around Ireland's development of *inclusive education*.

The first theme *Inclusion, Special Education and Inclusive Special Education* discusses the definitions of these key concepts, and presents current research on the influence on policy relating to inclusion in an Irish and international context. The second theme, *The Role of the SENCO in the Irish and International context*, presents the development and evolution of the SENCO role from an international and national perspective in line with policy developments. Specific reference is made to the UK setting, as this was the first jurisdiction to formally recognise the SENCO role. The third theme, *Leadership and the SENCO Role*, explores the literature around school leaders and its application and relevance to the SENCO role. Key research regarding SENCO role leadership is critically analysed and discussed in this section. In the fourth theme, *Professional Learning and the SENCO role*, models of professional learning together with professional learning for inclusion and the SENCO role are outlined and discussed. These key themes outline the existing knowledge base in these areas and gaps and provides the context from which the research questions emerged.

2.1 Literature Search

The initial step in the development of the literature review was the completion of a search process to reveal the relevant literature. The key topic areas of this research

were ‘inclusion’ and the ‘SENCO’ role and aspects of these topic areas formed the basis of the literature search. A keyword centred electronic search of relevant databases took place using terms such as ‘inclusion’, ‘special education’, ‘inclusive special education’, ‘SENCO’, ‘SENCO role enablers’, ‘SENCO role barriers’, ‘professional learning’, and ‘leadership in education’, which revealed the majority of research in this field. The databases that were searched including EBSCO, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Internet sites, such as the NCSE website (ncse.ie) and the Government of Ireland Circular website (gov.ie/circulars) were also examined to source relevant policy and report documents. Four key themes emerged from the literature and were organised into a literature map, which formed the framework for this chapter. This literature map is provided in Figure 2.1 below.

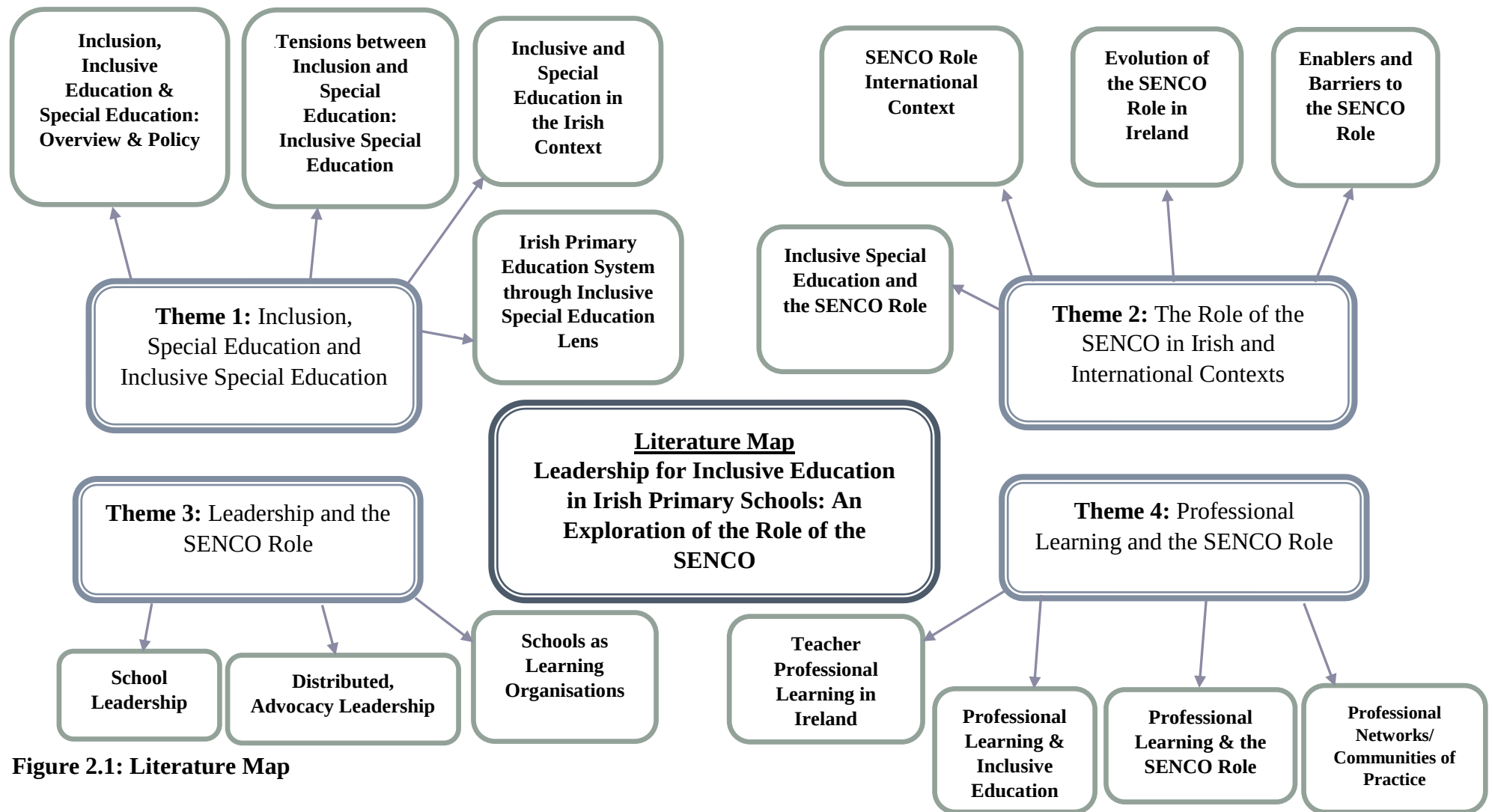


Figure 2.1: Literature Map

Examples of key research articles and policy documents can be seen in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Examples of key literature related to the four themes

Theme	Examples of Key Literature
T1: Inclusion: Inclusive Education, Special Education and Inclusive Special Education	<u>Policy Documents:</u> UN (2015); UNESCO (2005, 2018); UNCRPD (2018); DES (1993, 2005, 2007, 2017a, 2017b, 2020); Government of Ireland (1998; 2004); NCSE (2013, 2014, 2017, 2019) <u>Research Articles:</u> Norwich (1993, 2008, 2013); Florian (2008, 2019); Drudy and Kinsella (2009); Rose <i>et al.</i> (2010); Griffin and Shevlin (2011); Hornby (2015); Banks <i>et al.</i> (2016); Rose <i>et al.</i> (2015); Kauffman <i>et al.</i> (2020); Kauffman and Hornby (2020); Kenny <i>et al.</i> (2020); Fitzgerald <i>et al.</i> (2021); Shevlin and Banks (2021); Hornby and Kauffman (2023, 2024)
T2: SENCO Role in Irish and International Contexts	<u>Policy Documents:</u> England: DfE (1994); DfES (2001, 2004); DfE and DoH (2015). Ireland: DES (2000, 2005, 2007, 2017, 2020); Government of Ireland (2004) <u>Research Articles:</u> Kearns (2005); Abbot (2007); Takala <i>et al.</i> (2009); Ainscow and Sandhill (2011); Oldham and Radford (2011); O’Gorman and Drudy (2011); Goransson <i>et al.</i> (2015); Lindqvist (2013); Lindqvist and Nilholm (2013); Fitzgerald (2015); Fitzgerald and Radford (2017, 2020); Hallet and Hallet (2017); Klang <i>et al.</i> (2017); Curran <i>et al.</i> (2018); Dobson and Douglas (2018); Walsh (2020); Curran and Boddison (2021); Hallet (2020); Holland (2022); Lin <i>et al.</i> (2022); Colum and MacRuaric (2023)
T3: Leadership and the SENCO Role	<u>Policy Documents:</u> DES Inspectorate (2016a, 2016b); DES (2017a, 2017b, 2018); DE Inspectorate (2022a, 2022b); DE (2024) <u>Research Articles:</u> Senge (1990, 2014); Riehl (2000); Bass and Reggio (2006); Spillane (2006); Spilland and Diamond (2007); Leithwood <i>et al.</i> (2008); Swaffield and MacBeath (2009); Ainscow and Sandhill (2010); Hallet and Hallet (2010); Travers (2010); Oldham and Radford (2011); Hargreaves and Fullan (2012); Tissot (2013); Hargreaves <i>et al.</i> (2014); Sun and Leithwood (2015); Fitzgerald and Radford (2017, 2020); Dobson and Douglas (2020); Harris and Jones (2020); Leithwood <i>et al.</i> (2020); Clarke and Done (2021); Fitzgerald <i>et al.</i> (2021); Morrissey (2021); Done <i>et al.</i> (2023)
T4: Professional Learning and the SENCO Role	<u>Policy Documents:</u> OECD (2016, 2019); DES (2003, 2007, 2017a, 2017b); Teaching Council (2011, 2012, 2016) <u>Research Articles:</u> Travers <i>et al.</i> (2010); O’Gorman and Drudy (2011); Fitzgerald and Radford (2017); McElearney <i>et al.</i> (2018); Broderick (2019); McCormack (2019); Ni Bhroin and King (2020); Walsh (2020); Brennan <i>et al.</i> (2021); Brennan and King (2021); Curtin and Egan (2021); O’Hara (2021); Raftery (2021); Fitzgerald (2022); Hallet (2022); Done <i>et al.</i> (2023)

Theme One: Understandings of Inclusion: Inclusive Education, Special Education and Inclusive Special Education

2.2 Theme One Introduction

The first theme *Inclusion, Special Education and Inclusive Special Education* begins the discussion of the definitions and concepts of inclusion, special education and inclusive special education and presents current research on the influence of policy relating to inclusion and inclusive practices in an Irish and international context. In the context of this research, the parameters of this literature review as it relates to inclusive education are focused on inclusive special education as it aligns with the current system of education SENCOs operate within in Ireland. In addition, it reflects the most recent NCSE policy advice on the ‘progressive realisation of an inclusive education system in Ireland’ (NCSE 2024, p.15). The theory of inclusive special education developed by Hornby in 2015, aims at synthesising philosophies, policies and practices from both special education and inclusive education to provide a clear vision of effective education for all children with SEN (Hornby 2015). Furthermore, this theme will critically discuss Norwich’s (2008) ‘dilemmas of difference’ and will interrogate fundamental concepts of segregation, integration, inclusion and more recently the concept of ‘dedicated provision’ (Hornby and Kauffman 2023). The key policies that are driving inclusive educational reform will be discussed from an international and national perspective. Any understanding of the SENCO role is context specific, (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017) and therefore the interrogation of the conceptual and lived complexity of inclusive education is essential (O’Brien 2020).

2.3 Inclusion Confusion

Inclusion as a word, concept and value is complex with multiple meanings (Norwich 2013; Kauffman *et al.* 2018a; O’Brien 2020). There are differing opinions and a lack of agreement regarding the varying definitions of inclusion (Lindqvist and Nilholm 2014; Lauchlan and Greig 2015; Imray and Colley 2017). The term inclusion is used in so many contexts that it can mean many things to many different people, or everything to all people so without clarity on the definition it becomes meaningless

(Armstrong 2011). There has been confusion about what the ‘fashionable’ term inclusion actually looks like in practice (Armstrong *et al.* 2010, p. 236).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All (UNESCO 2005) define inclusion as:

....a process of addressing and responding to diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves...a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children.

(UNESCO 2005, p.13)

The term ‘inclusion’ is used in many ways when referring to inclusive schools or an inclusive society (Hornby 2015). Many sources refer to contrasting meanings, while some refer to advancing inclusive education as meaning increasing the number of children with SEN in mainstream schools whilst still continuing education in special schools for those children that need them. Others refer to the term ‘inclusion’ as the educating of all children in regular classrooms in mainstream schools with only temporary withdrawals for individual or group work or therapy (Hornby 2015). The meaning of inclusion can be caused by conflating social inclusion with inclusive education for children with SEN (Anastasiou and Kaufmann 2012). Social inclusion is used to refer to all individuals being valued and that all individuals have a part to play in developing an inclusive society, whereas social inclusion in education refers to the inclusion in mainstream schools of children with varying differences and needs (Hornby 2015). There are two different meanings, a broader focus of an inclusive society and that of inclusive education for children with SEN, but the broader version is often used by supporters of full inclusion (that is all children being educated in the mainstream class) to mean the same thing (Hornby 2015). As inclusion has many sides and holds many positions it also involves lived complexity, it involves people’s lives, so we do need to challenge, the ‘preferred ways of being’ that are promoted by the existence of barrier-creating systems (O’Brien 2020, p.3). Inclusion provokes global education systems to respond in an acknowledging manner to the complexity of human difference in multiple contexts (O’Brien 2020). At the centre of inclusion is the removal and conquering of barriers to learning and it represents the progressive realignment within societies, systems, schools, and communities that will create

barrier-free equality of opportunity for all. Inclusion, as noted by O'Brien (2020) is not an outcome or a fixed state, it is a process. In the context of this research, inclusion is about providing an appropriate education and the best learning opportunities for all children, including those with SEN, to meet their specific needs.

2.3.1 Inclusive education

Over the last thirty years, socially responsive approaches to inclusive education have been driving educational policy reform internationally (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021). Inclusion has become a stage for social justice (Nutbrown and Clough 2006) and inclusion is educationally and socially desirable (Williams-Brown and Hodgkinson 2020). The term inclusive education is also widely used but offers no universally accepted definition (Florian 2008; Winter and Raw 2010; Salend 2015; Boyle and Anderson 2020) and no definition has been cemented within the literature (Hodgkinson and Vikerman 2009). A common definition of what comprises inclusive education in practice has also proved elusive (Slee 2011; Boyle and Anderson 2020). There too, has been much debate on varying interpretations and assumptions of definitions (Ainscow 2007; Florian 2008; Armstrong 2011; Imray and Colley 2017; Kauffman *et al.* 2018a) but yet to date there is no definition on inclusive education that is globally accepted (Boyle and Anderson 2020). Broadly speaking, inclusive education is considered:

a multi-dimensional concept that includes the celebration and valuing of difference and diversity, consideration of human rights, social justice and equity issues, as well as a social model of disability and a socio-economic model of education.

(Hornby 2015, p.235)

As noted by Salend (2011), there are key principles through which the philosophy of inclusion is put into practice. Firstly, ensuring that all learners are provided with challenging, engaging and flexible general education curricula; secondly by embracing diversity and responding to individual strengths and challenges; thirdly by reflecting on practice and differentiating instruction; and fourthly by establishing collaboration amongst all the school community and other professional and community agencies. Inclusive education encompasses the process of transforming schools and it focuses on children's accessibility and entitlement to

education (Mitchell 2009; Slee 2011; Loreman 2014). Many countries are obligated to provide a continuum of provision with appropriate levels of education, appropriate placement and a need to find the best possible provision for all children (Alzahrani 2020). According to Boyle and Anderson (2020, p.884), ‘in its simplest form, inclusive education is about providing the most optimum learning opportunities to all children, irrespective of the context in which this is provided’. Inclusive education is considered a crucial element of education for all children, as it is a process that involves schools and other settings of learning to work inclusively to provide services for all learners, regardless of their differences in ethnic groups, cultural backgrounds and learning abilities (UNESCO 2005).

The International Conference on Education in 2008, *Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future* suggests that those making decisions on policies, should acknowledge that the school environment should be conducive to effective learning and inclusive of all children (UNESCO 2009). Its policy guidelines on inclusion in education describe inclusive education as:

A process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners and can thus be understood as a key strategy to achieve education for all (EFA). As an overall principle, it should guide all education policies and practices, starting from the fact that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just and equal society.

(UNESCO 2009, p.8)

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015) published by the United Nations General Assembly is based around 17 Sustainable Goals. Within this document, it was noted that:

People who are vulnerable must be empowered. Those whose needs are reflected in the Agenda include all children, youth and persons with disabilities (of whom more than 80 % live in poverty).

(UN 2015, p.7)

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 for Education, aims to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (UN 2015, p.21). The Brussels Declaration that followed the Global Education Meeting enfolded this broader idea of inclusion in education and defined it as:

...the rights to safe, quality/ and learning throughout life.....that requires particular attention to be given to those in vulnerable situations, person with disabilities, indigenous peoples, those in remote rural areas, ethnic minorities, the poor, women and girls, migrants, refugees, and displaced persons whether as a result of conflict or natural disaster.

(UNESCO 2018, p. 2)

Education systems are being called upon to respond to diversity across the world and it is this concept of inclusive education that is being promoted internationally. There is now a focus not just on who has access to education within educational systems but also now the quality of this education is being addressed (Florian 2019). There is much debate about how to provide for everyone in an inclusive education system, and whether a parallel system of special needs education is an obstacle or if it is key to the challenge of providing an equitable education for diverse groups of learners (Florian 2019).

2.3.2 Special educational needs

Inclusive education was originally concerned with the education of pupils with a disability which was brought about by The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) and subsequently it has been the predominant philosophy for the education of pupils worldwide (Florian 2019; Boyle and Anderson 2020). The World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca in Spain in 1994, addressed governments and the international community in the concluding statement, which is now known as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994). Governments were called upon to endorse and prioritise inclusive education policy and practice and to expand provision. The *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* (UNESCO 1994) defined the term SEN, which stated that it ‘refers to all those children and youth whose needs arise from disabilities or learning difficulties’ and ‘that those with special education needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them with a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting those needs’ (UNESCO 1994, p.viii).

This definition uses the terms learning difficulty and disability. The term learning difficulty is usually understood with regards to challenges associated with performing the same standard as others in the same age group. A learning difficulty by definition can refer to a type of barrier to learning such as challenges with reading,

writing, spelling, arithmetic, mathematics or problem solving (Florian 2019). Learning difficulties are sometimes caused by underlying disabilities, for example, dyspraxia can affect handwriting, but it cannot be assumed that learning difficulties are caused by disabilities. A disability refers to a physical, intellectual, communication, mental or sensory impairment that can limit the ability to participate in everyday activities. However, there are other reasons that children may not perform to the same standard as others in the same age group that go beyond an impairment. Learners may, for example, experience difficulties in learning due to differences in the mother tongue, cultural differences or absences from school (Florian 2019). Many countries use some processes to classify and determine eligibility for services, planning for the provision of special needs education and produce information to say who will receive services and how well they are learning (Florian 2019).

A definition of special needs education from The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is that it is designed ‘to facilitate learning by individuals who, for a wide variety of reasons, require additional support and adaptive pedagogical methods in order to participate and meet learning objectives in an education programme’ (UOE 2016, p.10). This definition does not focus on the specific terms to classify who specifically will receive support, as it states individuals that require support for a wide variety of reasons. The definition focuses on special education being a resource that is provided when individual learners need something additional or different to what everybody else is receiving, to enable them to participate in learning and achieve certain goals. The concept of special needs is extensive and at times can be confusing. It is important to comprehend the role of special education, which aims to ‘minimise the impact of disability and maximise the opportunities for children with disabilities to participate in general education in their natural communities’ (Hehir 2005, p.49).

It is well documented in the literature that there is a nexus between special education and inclusive education. Much of the debate around inclusive education is still setting the construct up as being in direct competition with special education, that inclusive education is about the education of all children and young people rather than being about the education of pupils with a disability (or other diagnosable learning needs) (Boyle *et al.* 2020). Contrasting views about this perspective of inclusive education exist (Jackson *et al.* 2018) and there is still a reliance on labels and systems

of enrolments in special education settings to permit inclusive practices to succeed in mainstream schools (Boyle *et al.* 2020).

2.3.3 Dilemma of difference

Over the years, due to accommodating an ever-increasing diverse group of learners and perspectives on how to adapt to difference, many tensions and dilemmas have emerged in the special education arena. Norwich's (1993) study examined teacher's perspectives in the USA (n=38) and England (n=43), using interviews, on the dilemma of differences – which were related to identification (whether to identify and how, or not), curriculum (how much of the curriculum was relevant) and placement (whether or not they learn in mainstream classes). Norwich's (1993) study was conceptualised in acknowledgement of policy and practice decisions comprising dilemmas. The basic dilemma was whether to recognise, or not to recognise, learner differences, as either option implies risks or negative implications relating to stigma, devaluation, rejection or loss of opportunities (Norwich 2008). There are tensions around certain aspects of difference and differentiation. There are positive and negative conceptions in our society about human differences and differentiation in education. The negative perspective is that difference reflects lower status, less value and poor-quality provision and the positive perspective is that difference reflects the recognition of individuality and individual needs and interests. It is the tensions between these two conceptions of difference that brings to head dilemmas of difference. The findings of Norwich's (1993) study reflected the balancing required in trying to meet individuals' needs in inclusive ways while also trying to minimise negative implications at the same time. This dilemma is, if learners are not identified, it could prevent them from accessing the education they need but if they are identified as having SEN, they would risk being labelled and stigmatised (Kauffman and Badar 2014). The labelling of children is intended to enable inclusion but labels about learning difficulties or needs highlight the typicality of a group but they do not specify individual difference. People or their needs or how they identify are not the same (O'Brien 2020). Labels do enable inclusion in the functions of legislation, resourcing and early intervention provision but they can also separate out groups by identifying some complex difficulties of a larger group that represents socially constructed normality (O'Brien 2020). It is at this

point that labels can be seen to ‘other’ an individual or group from the perceived norm (Hallett 2022). Another concept to consider is homophily which relates to the idea that ‘similarity breeds connection’ (Koutsouris 2014, p.413). In education this concept raises the homophily/inclusion tension which lies between students’ preferences for ‘being among similar others’ and the moral notion of including everybody in an inclusive setting (Koutsouris 2014, p.413)

The dilemma of difference in the curriculum (how much of the general curriculum is appropriate to teach) has brought tensions regarding entitlement and the appropriateness of curricula for children with SEN. Over the years steps have been put in place to ensure that all children with SEN would have entitlement to access the same curriculum as other children. This has opened up opportunities for some children that may have been denied opportunities in the past but for the majority of children with SEN, who have various learning needs, the emphasis has been on academic achievements due to national assessments (league tables of schools) (Hornby 2015). However, the curriculum is not appropriate for pupils with moderate and severe learning needs as it prevents them focussing on curricula better suited to their needs, with the result that many are struggling to keep up (Hornby 2015). Farrell (2010) insists that children with SEN must have access to curricula, which are appropriate to them and not forced into a national curriculum that is designed for the mainstream population because no suitable alternative exists.

Placement tensions arise when considering placement for children with more severe SEN/disabilities in mainstream classrooms, the dilemma being that in the mainstream classroom access to scarce and specialist services and facilities are limited, while being placed in separate settings leads to feeling excluded and not being accepted by other children (Norwich 2008). Homophily, where ‘similarity breeds connection’, may offer a nuanced addition to minimise this dilemma (Koutsouris 2014, p.413).

2.3.4 Segregation, integration and inclusion

Over the last three decades’ many international policy documents established and endorsed the right to education for all children including children with SEN (UN 1948; UNESCO 1990) which has seen many transitions of where and how children with SEN

have been educated within schools. The United Nation's (UN) Global Strategy of Education for All (EFA), sets out that mainstream schools will facilitate an effective response to diversity by developing practices and procedures to do this (Farrell and Ainscow 2002). Recently, researchers have maintained that persistent myths ('zombies') exist regarding full inclusion that should have died out but have not (Hornby and Kauffman 2023, p.135).

In the United States, in the mid-20th century it became obvious that many children with disabilities were excluded from schools entirely, were unnecessarily removed from homes and communities or were receiving education of poor quality (Kauffman *et al.* 2018b). In 1975, special education was made federal law in the U.S. having passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EACHCA), which is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), since 1990. This legislation set out guidelines and regulations for educating children with disabilities and could determine if states were to receive any federal funding for education (Kauffman *et al.* 2020). The guidelines and regulations saw the introduction of a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) for all children with disabilities and the introduction of a continuum of alternative placement which would provide the 'Least Restrictive Environment' for all (Bateman 2017).

In the UK, the recommendations of The Warnock Report (1978) informed and influenced the legislation of the Education Act (1981) which provided the impetus for a significant shift in attitudes away from integration and a move towards inclusion (Lauchlan and Greig 2015). The Warnock Report reflected a paradigmatic shift away 'from a psycho-medical approach towards a sociological response' (Fitzgerald 2021, p.2) which also brought about changes to the policy and legislation in Ireland. From the Warnock Report the conceptions of the special educational needs were moving to more social understandings of SEN, linking to barriers that children with SEN may have to overcome within a school context and away from a medical model of problem or difficulty (Ekins 2015).

Integration was the term used to describe educational provision for pupils with special educational needs within mainstream schools and incorporating pupils with SEN into the mainstream of regular education (Farrell 2000; Alzahrani 2020).

Children could be in mainstream classes but yet spend most of their day isolated from their peers so integration was limited (Farrell 2000).

In the early 1990s, a significant shift took place internationally that moved educational systems away from integration towards inclusion and ‘an acceptance of a rights-based approach to education’ (Williams-Brown and Hodkinson 2020, p.688). As mentioned the Salamanca Statement in 1994 called on all countries to adopt the principle of inclusion in their educational policies and practices so that all children could access mainstream schools (UNESCO 1994).

Inclusive education was high on the agenda for many international programmes for education. In the UK, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) (2001) indicated that all professionals and stakeholders have a part to play in educating children with SEN in mainstream schools and the SENDA made it illegal to discriminate against pupils because of their SEN (Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2001). This reinforced the view that ‘all teachers are teachers of SEN’ (Lauchlan and Greig 2015, p.72). According to Lauchlan and Greig (2015), many policies and legislation that have been passed in the UK have developed guidelines for the assessment and intervention for children with SEN such as the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice, published in 2014 (DfE 2014).

The strong programme of inclusion, which was supported by authors such as Ainscow (1999), held the view that it is necessary that pupils with SEN be educated in mainstream schools as a matter of their right and as a matter of equal opportunity. This view put forward that the existence of special schools would not give mainstream schools the full opportunity to serve special needs appropriately. In contrast to this, the perspective of other authors is that there is a place for special schools and settings. Farrell (2000) noted if special schools ceased to exist that parents would be denied their right to choose a special school for their child with SEN if all children were being educated in a mainstream school as a matter of principle and the right of the child. Having a human right to allow children with SEN to be educated alongside their peers for some, may not be the morally right or the best option for them, as children also have a right to an appropriate education suited to their needs (Hornby 2015, Kauffman and Badar 2014). In the UK, Croll and Moses (2000) questioned how the continued

role of special schools and the commitment to inclusion can go together with government discussion papers and legislation supporting the principle of inclusion but also at the same time qualifying this support, by continuing to establish special schools. There have been tensions between finding the optimum provision for children with SEN and a commitment to the principle of inclusion (Alzahrani 2020).

There are increasing international demands to adhere to inclusive practices set out in the UNCRPD 2006, which obliges countries who have ratified it, to educate all children ‘under the same roof’ (Warnock 2005, p.36). The literature on inclusive education seems immersed in its thinking about debating appropriate placement (Rose *et al.* 2015; Kauffman *et al.* 2020). The view of full inclusion that is promoted is that all children and young people with SEND with no exceptions, must be educated in mainstream classrooms alongside their peers (Kauffman and Hornby 2020). This view stems from a rights-based agenda (UNCRPD) that children with SEND have an entitlement to a general education. An alternate view of inclusion is the importance of the ‘appropriateness of education’ (Kauffman and Hornby 2020, p.7), ‘effective instruction’, (Kauffman *et al.* 2018a, p.1) and the ‘principle of individualised decisions about education’ (Kauffman and Hornby 2020, p.7). Hornby and Kauffman in 2023 went further and referred to the existence of ‘special education’s zombies’, which are defined as myths or ideas that should have disappeared and died out but have not. Specifically, Hornby and Kauffmann (2023, p.135) noted that ‘special education’s biggest zombie is that only full inclusion brings about true social justice and the most effective education for students with disabilities’. The authors (Hornby and Kauffman 2023, p.135) refer to three specific zombies about full inclusion, as follows:

- Since the Salamanca Statement in 1994, full inclusion has been the internationally accepted policy;
- The feasibility of full inclusion has been demonstrated in some countries; and
- There is extensive evidence that inclusion is more effective than special education.

The authors further highlighted that these zombies:

must be exposed, challenged and finally eradicated so that further education provision for children with disabilities can focus on achievable goals and evidence of effectiveness rather than placement.

(Hornby and Kauffman 2023, p.135)

Previously it has also been noted that the policy of full inclusion, with its view of all children being educated in mainstream classrooms for the majority of their time at school, is in practice impossible to achieve (Kaufmann and Badar 2014; Hornby 2015). It is considered that there will always be some children with SEN who cannot be included in mainstream classrooms at a satisfactory level, which then sets a limit to the amount of children who can be educated in the mainstream schools effectively (Thomas and Loxley 2007; Hansen 2012; Kauffman and Badar 2014).

It has been questioned in the literature if full inclusion is indeed appropriate (Kauffman and Hornby 2020; Hornby and Kauffman 2023), achievable or realistic (Kauffman and Badar 2014; Hornby 2015) and there have been calls for more *temperate* approaches to inclusion (Kauffman *et al.* 2018a). The United Nation's (UN) global strategy of Education for All and the 'All Means All' agenda (UNESCO 2020) moving to *full inclusion*, has been referred to as 'the claim that all pupils with disabilities are best placed in general education with needed support' and that it is an international issue (Kauffman *et al.* 2018a, p.1). The UNCPRD, Article 24, General Comment No. 4, urged all countries to implement fully inclusive education systems as soon as possible (UNCPRD 2006) and it is noted that this policy directive suggests the extinction of special education as it exists today (Hyatt and Hornby 2017). Special education has been described in the literature as incompatible with inclusive education (Florian 2019) but yet others state that there is a need for specialist provision (Rose *et al.* 2015) and that special education is an 'indispensable component of inclusive education' (Kauffman and Hornby 2020, p.7). Within the UNCPRD policy directive inclusion is emphasised as a process that involves more than merely placing pupils with a disability in regular schools and classrooms. The UNCPRD General Comment No.4 states that inclusion is a process that requires genuine systemic level reform and transformation if all children are to receive access in an equitable manner to a high quality education in the same place that will support their participation and progress in their own age groupings (UNCPRD 2006). It is also stated that inclusion is distinct from integration (where pupils are placed in regular schools if they have the ability to adapt to the requirements of that environment), segregation (where pupils with disabilities are educated in separate environments than pupils without disabilities) and exclusion (where there is no access to education for pupils). Hornby and Kauffman (2023) refer to the term 'dedicated' as a more apt description of the continuum of

alternative placements than ‘segregated’ and noted that proponents of full inclusion are unwilling to consider this term. The current system of special education in Ireland suggests that the implementation of special education grafted onto the general education system is due to confused thinking at policy level (Shevlin and Banks 2021). Shevlin and Banks’ (2021) view is that a successful inclusive education system in Ireland would require a complete overhaul of existing policies and practices.

2.3.5 Tensions between inclusive education and special education

Currently the fields of inclusive education and special education provide contrasting views about ways of meeting the needs of children with SEND and are often regarded as being diametrically opposed in their approaches to providing education for children with SEND (Hornby 2015). Inclusive and special education in the international discourse ‘occupy contested and highly politicised spaces’ (Fitzgerald 2020, p.1). Proponents of full inclusion hold the view that pupils with additional needs are entitled to be educated in mainstream schools irrespective of their level of need (Ainscow 1999; Slee 2011; Florian 2019). Inclusive and special education are often portrayed as binary concepts and it has been purported that the co-existence of both are necessary as they are equally essential aspects of an effective education system (Hornby 2020). Hornby (2015) argues that both inclusive and special education are complex, interrelated and interdependent. There is a need to look at approaches to inclusive and special education that considers the necessary co-existence of both and recognises the distinct and unique needs of pupils. In response, Hornby (2015) proposed the theory of ‘inclusive special education’, which is a synthesis of both inclusive and special education that aims to integrate the two approaches into the education system.

2.3.6 Hornby’s Theory of Inclusive Special Education

The theory of inclusive special education comprises ‘a synthesis of the philosophy, values and practices of inclusive education with the interventions, strategies and procedures of special education’ (Hornby, 2015, p. 234). As inclusive education and special education are based on different philosophies and provide different views for children with special educational needs and disabilities, inclusive special education

offers and promotes a vision and guidelines that have the potential to facilitate an effective education for all children with SEN and disabilities (Hornby 2015) and which allow for a conceptualisation of and positioning of the SENCO role therein. The bringing together of the ideas, philosophies and values of inclusive education along with evidence-based practices and instructional approaches of special education can result in the development of an integrated response to a continuum of need (Hornby 2015).

Hornby's model of inclusive special education presents integrated approaches from both inclusive education and special education. The approach aims to secure that all children with SEND are effectively educated in mainstream or special schools, wherever is deemed appropriate, from early childhood through to secondary school education (Hornby 2015). Hornby noted that inclusive special education:

...is about providing the best possible instruction for all children with SEND, in the most appropriate setting, throughout all stages of a child's education, with the aim of achieving the highest possible level of inclusion in the community post-school.

(Hornby 2015, p. 247)

The development of a comprehensive system of inclusive special education has been outlined by Hornby (2015) and these components of inclusive special education are provided in Figure 2.2. Central to Hornby's (2015) model is the quality of teaching and learning to pupils with SEN and the use of effective practices such as evidenced-based interventions, which are informed by pupils' individual strengths. The model advocates for a flexible continuum of provision for pupils with complex needs but it also recognises that most pupils should be educated in the mainstream classroom. In addition, the model outlines the importance of effective organisational procedures and systems to maximise the learning for all pupils with SEN. Hornby (2015) also outlines the importance of the mainstream and special schools working closely and collaboratively and that special schools provide special education and guidance and support to mainstream schools. In the following sections, detail is provided on each of these components.



Figure 2.2: Hornby's theory of 'inclusive special education' (adapted from Hornby (2014, p. 14)).

Implementing effective practices from special and inclusive education

The first element of Hornby's model of inclusive special education involves implementing effective practices that have established research-based evidence for supporting both effective special education (Mitchell 2014) and inclusive education (Salend and Whittaker 2012). These practices focus on 'fostering acceptance of diversity of abilities and use strength-based approaches' (Hornby 2015, p. 247). Established systems such as Response to Intervention (RtI) (Burns and Gibbons 2008), Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (King and Sears 2009) and Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (Savage *et al.* 2011) are used to manage behaviour and facilitate learning. Optimising the effectiveness of teaching is ensured through close collaborative partnerships with parents and other professionals, and through the

use of interventions such as assistive and instructional technologies, peer tutoring, co-operative learning and teaching meta-cognitive strategies. Interventions must be culturally relevant and responsive (Habib *et al.* 2013).

Continuum of placement options from mainstream classes to special schools

The model of inclusive special education recognises that most learners can be educated effectively in mainstream classes but that there is also a minority of learners with complex needs that could benefit more from settings, such as resource rooms, special classes or special schools for some or all of the time (NCSE 2010; Kauffmann and Badar 2014; NCSE 2014). It is necessary that a continuum of placement options is available for pupils' needs ranging from full-time placement in mainstream schools to full-time placement in special schools or residential facilities. Hornby's model is one that allows flexible movement between various placements to ensure the most appropriate option throughout all stages of a learner's schooling.

Education in the most appropriate setting, through all stages of a child's education

An essential aspect of a continuum of placement options is that movement exists between the various placement options, namely mainstream classes to special schools, so that the child is provided with an education in the most appropriate setting for all stages of their schooling (Hornby 2015). The opportunity should exist for children to move between the various placement options as necessary so that they are immersed in the most appropriate programmes during their school-life (Hornby 2015). It is essential that a continuum of placement options exist and that there is flexibility within the school system for children to transfer when needed so that they 'are at all times being educated in the setting that best facilitates their learning' (Hornby 2015, p. 249).

Organisation for providing optimal education for all children

Coherent education policy is a necessity and these policies should be based on the principles of inclusive special education. Firstly, statutory guidelines need to be put in place and then implementation of these at regional level will need to be ensured through mechanisms such as school inspections. Schools will then need policies and practices in place for the identification and assessment of SEN, provide appropriate interventions and assessment of the interventions and also review and monitor the progress of the learner using individualised educational programmes. Schools need to

have organisational procedures to ensure the effective provision for learners with SEN and this should be implemented by qualified members of the SEN team. Schools should ensure that school-wide practices are based on research evidence of effectiveness in facilitating the social and academic development of learners with SEND (Hornby *et al.* 2013). Lastly, schools should ensure that all teachers must be able to identify children with SEN and should use evidence-based strategies, such as cooperative learning and peer tutoring whenever possible to optimise learning for learners with SEND (Hornby *et al.* 2013).

Focus on effectively including as many children as possible in mainstream schools

It is essential to educate teachers and develop their knowledge, skills and understanding on the different types of SEN and the practical teaching strategies needed in order to effectively educate as many learners as possible in mainstream schools. In order to successfully include children with SEN and to implement effective inclusive special education the essential factors that schools need in place are having high expectations for all learners; using collaboration and differentiation to provide quality instruction for all learners; having access to high quality ongoing Continuous Professional Development (CPD); ensuring efficient and flexible use of resources, utilising distributed leadership and shared decision making; utilising comprehensive data systems to monitor pupil progress and developing partnership skills to work effectively with parents and other professionals (Hornby 2015).

Close collaboration between mainstream schools and special schools and classes

There are two roles for special schools in inclusive special education. They firstly provide special education for learners who require higher support needs and secondly, they provide guidance and support to assist mainstream schools (Ekins 2012). An important element of the philosophy and practice of inclusive special education is the collaboration between special schools and mainstream schools as this is a key factor in effectively educating children with SEN in mainstream schools. Collaboration between the two settings requires teachers to develop interpersonal skills that are necessary for effective consultation and collaboration between them and their colleagues and also parents of children with SEN (Hornby 2014).

2.4 Ireland: Inclusive Education, Special Education, and Inclusive Special Education

In this section, literature related to inclusive education, special education provision and inclusive special education as it relates to the Irish context is reviewed. In Figure 2.3 the timeline of Irish and international policies related to these areas are outlined. The key Irish policy developments are discussed within the following sections.

2.4.1 Inclusive education and special education in the Irish context

Inclusive education is at a crossroads in Ireland (Shevlin and Banks 2021) and the future development of inclusive provision for pupils with SEN is in tension with the UNCRPD. Inclusion in the Irish educational context has been defined as a process of:

addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners through enabling participation in learning, cultures, and communities and removing barriers to education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements, to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her attendance at school.

(Winter and O'Raw 2010, p.39)

A review of existing provision and future plans have been prompted by the ratification of the CRPD in 2018 (Shevlin and Banks 2021) and special schools and classes have become the crux of the inclusion debate. In 2019, the NCSE published a progress report titled *Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes. An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society?*. The interim report advised that it is time to review whether greater inclusion in mainstream classes offers a better way forward for pupils with complex educational needs rather than special schools and classes offering part of the continuum of educational provision (NCSE 2019). The report stated that:

the convention has already advised that having a mainstream education system and a separate special education system is not compatible with its view of inclusion and that parallel systems are not considered inclusive.

(NCSE 2019, p.5)

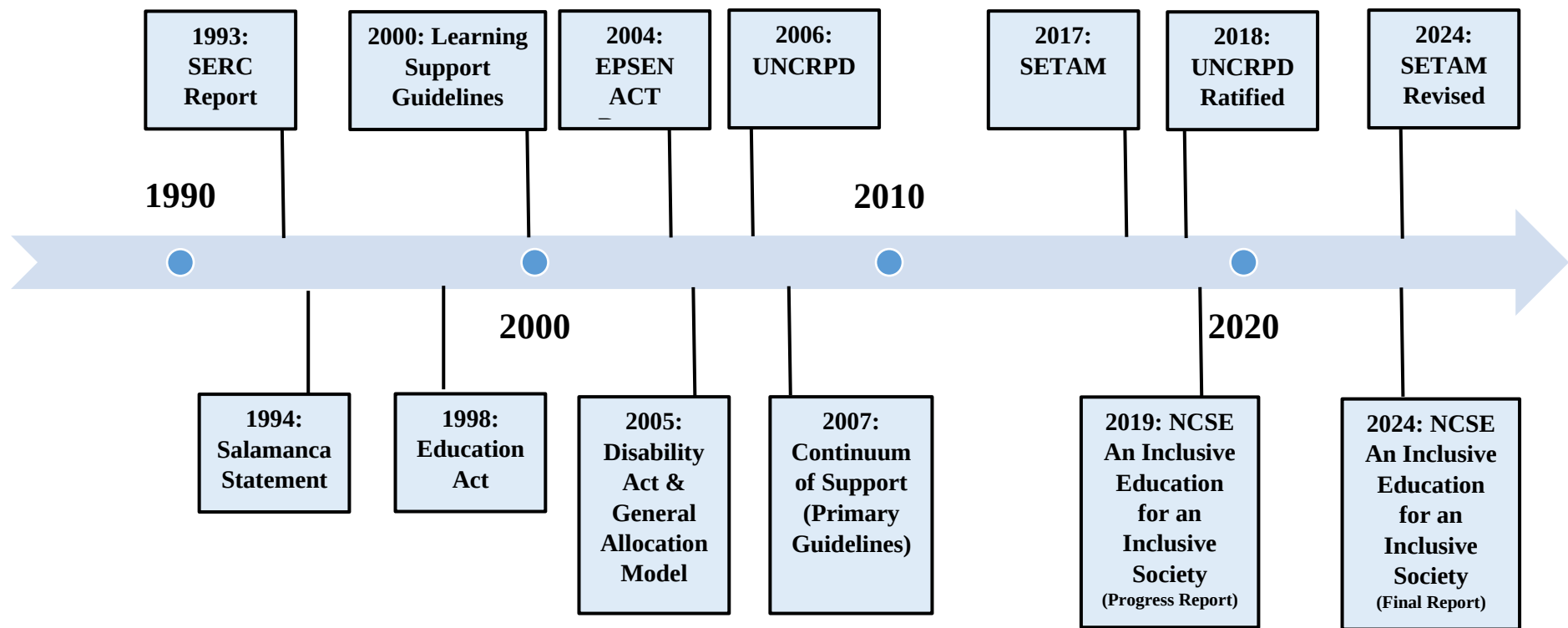


Figure 2.3: Timeline of Irish and International Policies

The report added to the heated debate about the future of special education in Ireland (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021). Special schools and classes would close or there would be a dilution of special education in the system if the policy is enacted following the report from the NCSE (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021). This would mean less of the dual system as we currently know it, which offers a continuum of provision. A final report which provides policy advice to the Minister for Education was due to be published in 2020 but was delayed until early 2024 (NCSE 2024). This policy advice paper provides recommendations that aim for ‘the phased development of the progressive realisation of an inclusive education system for Ireland and for that system to be informed by, and aligned to, the relevant articles of the UNCRPD’ (NCSE 2024, p.14). It could be viewed that this policy advice aligns with Hornby’s model of inclusive special education due to the recommendations related to greater partnership with external agencies and the HSE, and the move towards closer collaboration between special and mainstream schools.

Over the last two decades the commitment to inclusive education has increased with major changes to policy (Government of Ireland 2004; NCSE 2011; DES 2017a; DE 2024) and increased spending for special education in recent years (Banks *et al.* 2016; Banks 2021; NCSE 2023a; NCSE 2024). The number of children and young people identified with SEN has increased, totalling to over 25 percent of the school population (McCoy *et al.* 2020). Whilst this is occurring, there is a regeneration of specialised and dedicated provision, particularly in the expansion of the number of special classes (Fitzgerald 2021; NCSE 2023a). There has also been major expansion for the provision for special needs assistants (SNAs), special education teachers (SETs) and as mentioned special classes (NCSE 2023a; NCSE 2024). Investment in special needs education has increased from €1.2 billion in 2011 to €2 billion in 2020 (NCSE 2024). Between 2011 and 2020 there has been a 51% increase in total investment on supports for children and young people (NCSE 2024). The investment in special education teachers has increased by 69% in this time period, which has been matched with a 75% increase in expenditure on SNAs (NCSE 2024). The number of special classes in Irish primary schools has increased from 356 in 2011 to 1,807 in 2022 and the number of students in special classes in Ireland has increased from 9,259 in 2020 to 12,289 in 2022 (NCSE 2023a). The following paragraphs will now detail an overview of relevant legislative and policy developments in Ireland.

In 1993 the publication of *The Report of the Special Education Review Committee* (SERC), which was heavily influenced by the Warnock Report, was a key development and the Irish government's first serious endeavour to develop inclusive educational provision for children with SEN (Shevlin *et al.* 2008). The report outlined principles to assist in the development of special education in Ireland (DES 1993). The concept of the Continuum of Support and framework for the deployment of resources and support was introduced and it was recommended that pupils with a disability should be integrated in mainstream schools (Kenny *et al.* 2020).

The Education Act of 1998 made provision for the education of every person in the country, including any person with a disability or who has SEN (Government of Ireland 1998). This Act set down that access to educational provision for children and young people with disability and /or additional learning needs should be on an equal basis to their non-disabled peers (Shevlin and Banks 2021). In 2000 the *Learning Support Guidelines* were published (DES 2000) and recommended 'policies that emphasise the enhancement of the classroom-based learning for all pupils' (DES 2000, p.9). The key theme of the guidelines was that learning support should be a collaborative process between all teachers, the Principal and parents.

The EPSEN Act (2004) made specific reference to inclusion (Banks and McCoy 2017), and it provided a legislative framework for inclusive education in Ireland (NCSE 2006; Shevlin *et al.* 2008). This legislation outlined that children and young people with SEN shall where possible, be educated 'in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs' (Government of Ireland 2004, p.5). The EPSEN Act (2004) included in its definition of special education 'any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition' (Government of Ireland 2004, p.6). A main implication of the Act was that there was a dramatic increase in the number of children with SEN attending mainstream schools (Banks and McCoy 2017). Due to the economic constraints in Ireland following the publication of the EPSEN Act (2004) all the elements of the Act are still not fully implemented (Rose *et al.* 2015) and the Act is currently undergoing review. Shevlin and Banks (2021) note that Ireland now needs to consider the fundamental question as to whether it will reconfigure supports that have been allocated for learners who have additional needs and focus on how inclusive learning environments can be developed,

as envisaged in the EPSEN Act (2004). This may perhaps be considered in the review that has been underway since 2022.

In 2005, the government introduced the General Allocation Model (GAM) with the intent to develop ‘truly inclusive schools’ (DES 2005, p.4). It provided guidance on the deployment of ‘additional teaching resources in a flexible manner’ and allowed for the decentralisation of resources to be managed locally (DES 2005, p.3). The revised generalised system of allocation of supports intended that the learning needs of pupils with high incidence special educational needs be addressed including those who have milder levels of learning difficulties that would normally be eligible for learning support. The allocation of resource hours for pupils deemed to have low incidence SEN (complex needs) continued to be ‘based on categories of disability’ and ‘a diagnostic /medical approach’ (Kenny *et al.* 2020, p.4) and identified by a formal assessment by a multidisciplinary team or psychologist, occupational therapist, speech or language therapist, combined with a Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENO) evaluation (Kenny *et al.* 2020; Shevlin and Banks 2021). The resourcing model attempted to lessen dependence on assessment to secure provision but parents were often forced to pay for assessments and schools sometimes had to decide which children qualify for the State sponsored assessments (Shevlin and Banks 2021). The resource allocation was noted as an inequitable system (Rose *et al.* 2010; NCSE 2013; NCSE 2014) due to some children experiencing delays in support resulting from delays in accessing assessments required for the allocation of teaching hours. The report also highlighted that the GAM made allocations on the basis of the number of mainstream teachers in each school and did not take into account the differing needs of schools when allocating special education teachers.

In 2014, the NCSE published a report, which recommended that a new model to allocate supports should be put in place on the basis of the profiled educational needs of the school (NCSE 2014). Subsequently this new resource allocation model was introduced in 2017, Special Education Teachers Allocation Model (SETAM). This was a move away from the GAM, which had been in existence since 2005 and was a model that explicitly linked provision with individual pupil assessment. Rose *et al.* (2015) noted that there was a shift away from focusing on labelling and individual learner pathology to a more inclusive approach. A school’s educational profile is comprised of a baseline component provided to every mainstream school to assist with

learning difficulties and early intervention and the school educational profile component. The Circular 13/2017 outlined that this profile is based on the number of pupils with complex needs, the learning support needs of pupils as evidenced by standardised tests and also the social context of the school including disadvantage and gender (DES 2017a). In 2024, the Department of Education revised the SETAM with particular reference to the profiling criterion. Complex needs was removed as a criteria due to issues with the accuracy and consistency of available data provided on a national basis from the HSE Children Disability Network Teams (DE 2024). Gender was also removed as a profiling criteria and greater emphasis was placed on standardised testing. A summary of the profiling used in the 2017 and 2024 versions of SETAM are outlined in Table 2.2. Over time we have moved from segregation to integration, one would ask, where are we now? Inclusive segregation? Dedicated provision? Inclusive special education? How will these changes impact on how provision is lead and implemented in schools?

Table 2.2: Profiling criteria for the SET Allocation Model in 2017 and 2024 (DES 2017a; DE 2024).

SETAM 2017 (DES 2017a)	SETAM 2024 (DE 2024)
Profiled allocation criteria: • Baseline: 20% • Disadvantage: 5.5% • Standardised Tests (Literacy and Numeracy): 27.85% • Complex Needs: 42.5% • Gender: 4.35%	Profiled allocation criteria: • Baseline based on enrolments: 25% • Disadvantage: 6.5% • Standardised Tests (Literacy and Numeracy): 68.5% Note: No allocation for Complex Needs and Gender removed as a criterion.

In the most recent guidance document in Ireland, *Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs Guidelines for Primary Schools* (DES 2017b) it is outlined that a ‘whole-school approach to special educational needs provision should reflect the Department’s commitment to the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs’ (DES 2017b, p.21). Updated guidance is due to be published in 2024. It is

outlined that schools should adopt a whole-school approach to programme planning and to the implementation of early-intervention and prevention programmes. It includes that schools need to adapt their existing SEN policies to guide new whole-school collaborative approaches, which will enable school leaders and teachers to review planning, policy and practices. The SETAM emphasises that a whole-school approach is necessary for the effective inclusion of pupils with SEN and advocates for the importance of collaboration between key stakeholders within the school microsystem (DES 2017a). Collaboration is a central aspect of SETAM and has been described as a ‘powerful tool for the implementation of effective inclusive practice’ (Mulholland and O’Connor 2016, p.1079). Mora-Ruano *et al.* (2019) commented that collaboration is a driver that can positively influence the entire school community. Collaboration can be defined as a process involving two or more individuals who ‘share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in the area by interacting on an ongoing basis’ (Wenger *et al.* 2002, p.4). Over the past two decades, there has been an emphasis on fostering collaborative practice to support pupil learning and this has been the focus of national reform agendas (Mulholland and O’Connor 2016; Quigley 2018). These national reform agendas include, for example, *Literacy and Numeracy for Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (DES 2011a), *The Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* (DES 2016), *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Plan 2017* (DES 2017c), and *The Demonstration Project on In-School and Early Years Therapy Support* (DES 2018). Quigley (2018) commented that reforms such as those highlighted above aim to foster collaboration among key professionals to bring about improvements in systems, practices and decision-making. Research needs to consider the role that the SENCO plays in fostering collaborations within and outside the school setting.

Finally, in the guidance document there is direction relating to the role of the class teacher and the role of the special education teacher in relation to effective teaching and learning. It states that the Principal’s leadership role is a key element to an inclusive whole-school approach to supporting pupils with SEN (DES 2017b). It is noted in the guidance that the Principal’s leadership role is to develop inclusive whole-school policy and assign staff strategically to teaching roles, and that teachers’ work should be co-ordinated to ensure continuity of provision for all pupils (DES 2017b).

No reference, however, is made to the SENCO role or the responsibilities of a co-ordinating teacher to lead and manage the SEN provision within the school. It has to be questioned how these whole-school collaborative approaches to provision can be implemented without a formalised SENCO role within the primary education sector.

2.4.2 View of the Irish primary education system through an Inclusive Special Education (Hornby 2015) lens

As the Irish education system offers a continuum of provision for pupils with SEN, Hornby's model can theoretically align to this system (Rose *et al.* 2015). The continuum of provisions aligns with the 'continuum of placement option' component of Hornby's model which advocates that whilst most pupils should be educated in mainstream classrooms, there is a need for a flexible continuum of provision to meet a continuum of need for pupils with SEN (Fitzgerald and Radford 2020).

The multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) known as the Continuum of Support in the Irish context is an evidenced-based framework which has three tiers of support aimed at pupils needing support and frames the response to intervention in Ireland (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021). This framework 'complements Hornby's model of inclusive special education in that it is intended to support implementation of a systematic and adaptive approach to meeting the needs of pupils with SEND' (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021, p.10). The Continuum of Support lays out a graduated solution-orientated framework of assessment, intervention and evaluation in schools with an emphasis on supports such as academic, social, emotional and behavioural. Three distinct school-based processes exist to address the needs of all pupils, whole-school or classroom support (supports for all); school support; (support for some) and school support plus (support for a few). The bottom tier, namely whole-school or classroom support, is concerned with processes of prevention, effective mainstream teaching and identifying needs at an early stage.

The Continuum of Support guidelines (DES 2007) and the SETAM (DES 2017b; DE 2024) guidelines complement Hornby's 'implementing effective practice from special education and inclusive education' component. The DES guidelines suggest using individualised planning, student support files and plans, and interventions that draw on evidence-informed practice, which build on the pupils'

strengths and interests (DES 2017b). These student support plans are differentiated to meet the needs of the pupil and appropriate interventions are put in place following assessment and the development of individualised learning targets. The DES (2020) suggests that good target-setting is needed for effective teaching and learning and these should align with the guiding principles linked to assessment; strengths-based; linked to interventions and developed collaboratively. The student support files are also used to inform what level of support is required for the pupil and can assist in deciding if support should be discontinued, continued at the same level or move to a higher or lower level of support (DES 2017b). The guidelines promote the use of evidence-based interventions to meet the diverse needs within the classroom and ‘facilitate the meaningful inclusion of pupils with special educational needs’, such as co-operative teaching and learning, collaborative problem-solving activities, heterogeneous group work, differentiation and embedding technology in teaching, learning and assessment (DES 2017b, p.12). It is evident from all of this that these guidelines in Ireland align to Hornby’s theory as they promote the use of the ‘implementation of effective practices’, such as strengths-based approaches and the use of technology, assessment strategies and IEPs, as outlined by Hornby (2015). This is noteworthy as Hornby (2015) acknowledged that a key element of inclusive special education is the effective implementation of evidence-based practices.

Parental engagement is promoted in the Continuum of Support (DES 2007) and the SETAM (DES 2017b) guidelines thus aligning with Hornby’s theory of inclusive special education. Specifically, the DES (2020) noted that the continuum process and the student support files and plans ‘provide valuable opportunities to engage with parents and to build a collaborative approach to identifying and responding to the needs of pupils with special educational needs’ (DES 2017b, p.25). The guidelines also encourage and recommend engagement and collaboration with external bodies and agencies, such as National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) Psychologists, SENO, the NCSE Support Service, the Inspectorate, Health Service Executive (HSE) and allied health professionals, which is a factor that is promoted within Hornby’s (2015) model. The DES (2020) indicated that it is vital that schools have established procedures for collaborating and communicating with the various external bodies to enhance the quality of the provision provided to pupils with SEN. Hornby (2015) indicates that teachers having access to high quality CPD is an

aspect of the model and would optimise teachers effectively including as many children as possible in mainstream schools. For teachers to do this they need ‘a sound knowledge of the different types of SEND and the practical teaching strategies needed to teach them effectively in mainstream classrooms’ (Hornby 2015, p.250). There is increased pressure on schools to expand the range of skills and competencies among the teaching staff due to a greater number of pupils with varying needs being included in schools (Hick *et al.* 2018). This research, commissioned by the NCSE, has suggested that pre-service teachers lack confidence in their knowledge and ability to implement inclusive practices in schools and there has been a want for more support to address this (Hick *et al.* 2018). Inclusion has been identified as one of the priority learning areas in the Cosán Framework for Teachers Learning (Teaching Council 2016) but it does not distinctly recommend any specific standards or competencies in inclusive practices and any policy changes to insist engagement in this have been resisted (McCormack 2019). Within Ireland, the DES (2020) guidelines encourage CPD for all teachers and indicate that staff members should engage in appropriate CPD ‘to develop the capacity of schools to meet the educational needs of all pupils’ (DES 2017b, p.27). The guidelines indicate that educational leaders should assess their training needs so that an inclusive whole-school approach to SEN is developed within their setting (DES 2017b).

CPD for teachers working in special education is recommended but not compulsory (DES 2017b) therefore it cannot be assumed that schools are equipped to provide evidenced-based strategies for pupils with complex needs. It has also been reported that schools have decided to systematically place pupils with SEN on reduced timetables due to a lack in skills, knowledge or resources to support the attendance of the pupils for longer periods, which calls attention to the gaps in the required professional development available to teachers (O’Brien 2019). Hornby (2015) noted that to facilitate optimal learning for all children, including those with SEND, evidence-based practices, such as co-operative learning, should be used but for this to become a reality extensive training in teaching those with SEND should be incorporated into initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and on-going professional development.

A DES Inspectorate evaluation (2020) of special classes at primary and post-primary level highlighted the need for necessary qualifications and experience to

effectively teach in special school and class settings but did not provide any further specifics beyond this. It was also noted by the DES (2020) that school leadership needed to carefully select staff for special settings and stated that newly qualified staff or substitute teachers should not be deployed to special settings. Prior to this report, Banks *et al.* (2016) conducted a national longitudinal study in Ireland of special class provision and noted that teachers working in these SEN settings were often covering maternity leaves on temporary contracts or younger newly recruited staff (Banks *et al.* 2016). Such teachers lacked specific qualifications in SEN and this combined with lack of support from school leaders and staff members increased the risk of teacher stress and burnout (Banks *et al.* 2016). This study also noted that effective inclusive school leadership played an important role in how teachers are assigned to special class settings and in accessing appropriate CPD when requested (Banks *et al.* 2016). This is of particular importance as research noted that pre-service teachers lack confidence in their knowledge and ability to implement inclusive practices in schools and there has been a want for more support to address this (Hick *et al.* 2018; Kenny *et al.* 2020).

While there is evidence in Ireland and within the Continuum of Support (DES 2007) and the SETAM (DES 2017b) guidelines that appear to align with components and aspects of Hornby's theory of inclusive special education, the approach itself may be somewhat misaligned in Ireland as it goes against international mandates (UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities) which Ireland ratified in 2018. There are limitations that exist when applying Hornby's framework when considering the current context for inclusive special education in Ireland. There is support needed to develop the services across the system to encourage flexible movement along the continuum and there are no formal systems in Ireland that exist to develop close collaborations between mainstream and special schools (Rix *et al.* 2013). This lack of close collaboration could be viewed as indicative of the practice within the Irish education system, which consists of a continuum of parallel provision for pupils with SEN (Rose *et al.* 2015).

Finally, Hornby's theory of inclusive special education recommends collaborating closely with professionals (external bodies and agencies) but within the Irish context this is somewhat problematic as access to therapeutic services in Ireland is limited, due to extensive waiting lists and the lack of collaboration between schools

and external agencies. (NCSE 2014; Kenny *et al.* 2020; Concannon 2022; Holland and Fitzgerald 2023). A lack of collaboration between the Department of Education and the HSE. According to Fitzgerald *et al.* (2021), schools are working to provide a cohesive framework for evidence-based interventions across the Continuum of Support, which is a key principle of Hornby's model, but in practice they are not always aligned and access to tier three therapeutic interventions are significantly limited. Holland and Fitzgerald's (2023) mixed-methods study, which consisted of an online survey (n=278) and interviews (n=9) explored experiences of collaboration between SENCOs, senior leadership teams (SLT) and NEPS psychologists at each level of the Continuum of Support in post-primary schools. The study highlighted the importance of shared understanding of school systems between NEPS and post-primary schools. The findings illustrated the potential for high-quality collaborative practice across the Continuum of Support and identified barriers and facilitators to collaboration. Barriers included diverging understandings of collaboration, a lack of time and excessive workloads. Facilitators included, for example, shared understanding, knowledge of SEN and an understanding of school contexts. Holland and Fitzgerald (2023) also highlighted a need for NEPS psychologists to access ongoing professional learning to support the skills needed to facilitate collaboration. Holland and Fitzgerald (2023) found that formalisation of the SENCO role would support collaboration between the NEPS psychologists and schools. The study found that SENCOs required both specialised knowledge and interpersonal and leadership competence in their role and the importance of a recognised SEN qualification and relevant CPD for SENCOs was highlighted. Concannon's (2022) small sized qualitative study explored the nature and extent of collaborative practice between class teachers, SET teachers and speech and language therapists in Irish primary schools. This study found that in relation to the importance of collaborative practice in meeting the needs of pupils, participants reported common issues and challenges, such as a lack of time to engage with each other, absence of a shared knowledge and limitations of CPD around curricular change. The study suggested that due to these barriers, effective collaborative practice has been hindered and thus, the needs of pupils are not being appropriately addressed.

2.5 Theme One Conclusion

This theme outlined the key concepts and definitions surrounding inclusion, special education and inclusive special education and presented existing research on the influence of international policy, discourse and practice on the educational landscape in Ireland. Policy changes and legislation have dramatically changed the landscape regarding the nature of provision for pupils with additional needs and the leadership and management of such provision in primary school settings. In the context of this research, the parameters of this literature review as it relates to inclusive education are focused towards that of inclusive special education. The theory of inclusive special education developed by Hornby in 2015, aims at synthesising philosophies, policies and practices from both special education and inclusive education to provide a clear vision of effective education for all children with SEN (Hornby 2015). The concepts of segregation, integration, inclusion and more recently the concept of ‘dedicated provision’ (Hornby and Kauffman 2023) were discussed. The key policies that are driving inclusive educational reform were presented from an international and national perspective. Ireland stands at a crossroad regarding the establishment of inclusive schools (Shevlin and Banks 2021) and a parallel system of inclusive and special education persists (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021) in Ireland. This context in Ireland impacts the role of the SENCO regarding the leadership and management of provision and this together with international perspectives will be discussed in the next theme.

Theme Two: The Role of the SENCO in Irish and International Contexts

2.6 Theme Two Introduction

In this section, the evolution of the SENCO role from an international and national context is reviewed. Particular focus is based on the development of the role within the English context as this was the first jurisdiction to formally recognise and mandate the role. The SENCO role within the Irish context is considered in light of the developments in the international arena. In addition, extant literature related to the enablers and barriers for the enactment of the SENCO role are reviewed.

2.7 Inclusive Special Education and the Role of the SENCO

As the educational landscape rapidly transforms in response to the promotion of inclusive education agendas, it has brought challenges to the management and leadership of provision for pupils with SEN. Tensions regarding the controversial and problematic concept of inclusive education persist (Hornby 2020; O'Brien 2020) and questioning of the place of special education (Florian 2019; Kauffman and Hornby 2020). Mentioned previously, inclusive education is considered a right for children with additional and special educational needs and disabilities and is enshrined in law in many countries, including Ireland. Many national reforms are influenced by international declarations. In Ireland, although reforms have brought many changes to the education system, a parallel system of mainstream and special education still prevails (Shevlin and Banks 2021), with an increasing number of special schools and special classes (NCSE 2023a). The UN has advised that having a mainstream education system and a separate special education system is incompatible with its view of inclusion (Fitzgerald and Radford 2020). Fitzgerald and Radford (2020), maintain that in relation to the Irish education system, theoretically, Hornby's model of inclusive special education (2015) surfaces tensions when set against international mandates. The international mandates are driving for full inclusive education, and current policy and practice are set within a system that offers a continuum of parallel provision for pupils with SEN (Rose *et al.* 2015). When applying Hornby's Framework to the Irish context, Fitzgerald and Radford (2020), outline that various

limitations exist due to the absence of systemic support for inclusive special education, and advise that it is essential to develop school-wide capacity to respond to diversity and consider whether the SENCO role within Hornby's model is essential to support the development of an integrated inclusive special education approach.

Conflicting ideas of education exist, with inclusion being one (Englund and Quennerstedt 2008; Wikstrom 2012). The inclusion 'ideal' paved the way for equality, but it also brought many misconceptions and concerns for children with SEND and, it is within this 'maelstrom' of difficulty that the SENCO role finds itself (Smith and Broomhead 2019, p. 54). The development of the role of the SENCO is complex and closely relates to the discourse of inclusion (Goransson *et al.* 2019). The SENCO is expected to play a pivotal role in schools' work to develop structures and practices that respond more fully to all pupils and dismantle the provision of special support as a separate system within schools (Abbott 2007; Emanuelsson 2001; MacKenzie 2007; Rosen-Webb 2011). Goransson *et al.* (2019) concur that SENCOs are expected to be central to the development of inclusive education and partake in reconstructing special education by changing the whole-school environment to the differences between pupils. Having said this, these authors also noted that SENCOs risk reinforcing a separate system by segregating the problem from mainstream education by teaching pupils in small groups or individually. Many studies from different education systems have found difficulties in the establishment of a role that follows a whole-school approach to special education support (Travers 2006; Abbott 2007; Goransson *et al.* 2015) which are in line with inclusive practices (Abbott 2007; Lindqvist and Nilholm 2013). Lindqvist and Nilholm (2013) conducted a mixed-methods study using a survey design with forty-five educational leaders in Sweden. This study aimed to investigate how educational leaders view the role that SENCOs play in helping children in need of special support. Lindqvist and Nilholm (2013) reported that the study revealed no clear consensus among educational leaders regarding the SENCOs' roles in the schools and questioned whether the SENCOs are the catalyst to establish more inclusive practices in the Swedish school system.

The SENCO role is constructed within education systems where the SENCO role enactment is determined and influenced by broader educational policies in these countries. The SENCO is bound by accountability demands and regulations which are often incompatible to the aims of inclusive education and also a focus on efficiency

and performance (Goransson *et al.* 2019). Cowne *et al.* (2019) situate the evolving SENCO role at the epicentre of the tensions between standards and accountability and inclusion. Klang *et al.* (2017) ask how the SENCO role can be realised in schools, with such conflicting views in education, such as working in standards-based education systems. Standards-based education systems evaluate schools on academic measures of pupil's performance, which is viewed as a barrier to inclusion (Ainscow *et al.* 2006). It is worth noting that Sweden, which is viewed as being one of the most inclusive countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2011) is also in line with the trend of standards-based education. The Swedish school system is framed by policies aligned to standards-based education, which values pupils' achievement and examination performance (Klang *et al.* 2017). Such policies can potentially be counterproductive to inclusion and pose a barrier to SENCO leadership role enactment (Klang *et al.* 2017). This may provide a reason for the tension that resides in Sweden between policy and practice.

The absence in SENCO role consistency in various contexts across time (Wedell 2006; MacKenzie 2007; Hornby 2014) has brought variances in practices and duties over time (Cole 2005; Layton 2005; Hallet and Hallet 2017). This is partly due to how inclusive (special) education is interpreted in individual settings and the many interpretations of inclusive (special) education (MacKenzie 2007). The scope of the SENCO role varies internationally and it has undergone transformation and has metamorphosed over time (Ekins 2011; Cowne *et al.* 2019) and continues to evolve in a state of flux (Emanuelsson 2001; Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). Within existing extensive empirical research on the SENCO role, it has been acknowledged internationally and there is consensus that the nature of the SENCO role is complex, challenging and contextually bound (Norwich 2010; Fitzgerald and Radford 2017; Curran *et al.* 2018; Curran and Boddison 2021; Fitzgerald 2022). There is a fluid definition of the position due to variations in SENCO role enactment (Szwed 2007). There is often conflict with how the role is understood and facilitated in schools which leads to variances in executing the role effectively (Hallet and Hallett 2017).

Even though roles and responsibilities vary between SENCOs internationally, research indicates that the role is difficult and multifaceted (Kearns 2005; O'Gorman and Drudy 2011; Takala and Ahl 2014; Smith and Broomhead 2019; Middleton and Kay, 2021). There has been much research on the concerns that have been raised in

international contexts where the SENCO, or equivalent role, has become the key to the delivery of inclusive education, such as Sweden (Lindqvist 2013; Klang *et al.* 2017), Hong Kong (Fong Poon-McBrayer 2012), New Zealand (Lin *et al.* 2022), Finland (Takala *et al.* 2009), Greece (Agaliotis and Kalyva 2011) and Ireland (Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023). In England where the SENCO role was first established, the research has been in response to understanding individual experiences of those already in the role (MacKenzie 2012; Glazzard 2014), regarding how the role is operationalised in their school (Szwed 2007; Curran and Boddison 2021) or the complexities of policy framework negotiations (Robertson 2012; Hodgkinson 2020).

2.8 International Context

Traditionally, special needs support and education were placed with a specific teacher within a school, the so-called special needs teacher (Struyve *et al.* 2018). International educational research and policy indicated that the support for pupils with SEN should move towards all staff supporting pupils and this should be embedded in the school and that it is the responsibility of all within the school instead of one single teacher (Szwed 2007; Jacobs *et al.* 2013). The reasoning for this ‘whole-school approach’ is that teachers form the largest group of professionals that interact with pupils on a daily basis and enable them to identify and assist pupils in need of support for academic, social and personal development (Lam and Hui 2010). As inclusive educational practices evolve, the need for the role of the SENCO has grown. This role is not formally recognised in policy and has organically evolved in some countries in response to whole-school approaches to identify and meet pupils’ needs, which requires a whole-school response to coordination of provision (Crowther *et al.* 2001). The SET, along with their own teaching responsibilities were now undertaking a coordination role aimed at supporting and providing professional guidance to class teachers (Forlin 2001; Lindqvist 2013). The need for a SENCO, which also grew from changes in policy regarding whole-school approaches to SEN provision in schools, was now required in schools to act as an agent of systemic change (Cowne 2005, Robertson 2012, Ekins 2015; Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020). The position is similar to other roles in countries where schools operate internal mechanisms to support inclusion (i.e., special educators supporting others and their practice within the same

setting) (Layton 2005; Fong Poon-McBrayer 2012). Over the years, in England, the SENCO has become strategic in nature and focuses on leading the inclusive agenda within schools, co-ordinates practice and also works with families and outside agencies as part of the provision of SEN in schools.

Collaboration, which is required to co-ordinate whole-school approaches, requires that all stakeholders' roles are clearly defined to ensure equality in the collaborative process and the absence of the formalisation of the role could pose systemic barriers to collaboration (Curran 2019). Even though the SENCO role is clearly defined in England, there are dilemmas regarding the need for and level of specialism (Norwich 2010). If the SENCO role is over-specialised there is a risk of continuing the separation of pupils with or without SEN, which can hinder collaborative processes (Norwich 2010). However, if the SENCO functions are spread across too many school staff, specialist knowledge may be weakened and some pupils needs may possibly be discounted (Norwich 2010). These tasks such as coordinating whole-school approaches in the provision of SEN are implied in Irish guidelines for co-ordinating teachers but there is no role formalised in Ireland (DES 2017b).

New Zealand is similar to Ireland in that the SENCO role is not tightly defined; SENCOs are more common in schools but there is no formal requirement for schools to have SENCOs (Hornby 2014). In both Ireland and New Zealand, no additional qualification is necessary to assume the role, which can lead to extensive variations in schools (Hornby 2014). Notably, systemic barriers to collaboration may arise whether or not the role is formally defined. SENCOs, not unlike teachers, are subjected to policy, which inhibits or enhances their practice; they are also critical policy actors who interpret the policy and translate these policies into practice (Skerritt *et al.* 2021). The SENCO role is wrought with varied practices in response to policy translation. The SENCO role has developed in schools in spite of a policy gap in response to contextual demands (Skerritt *et al.* 2021).

In summary, the SENCO role, even though it is not always a formalised role is evident across many countries in Europe such as UK, Ireland, Sweden, Finland, Netherlands, Italy, Greece and Spain, and further afield in Hong Kong and New Zealand. This international literature review will focus on these countries due to the existence of the role and related research in these jurisdictions.

2.8.1 The evolution of the SENCO role in England

As England was the first jurisdiction to formalise the SENCO role, substantial empirical research exists in the literature, which is significant in the review of the evolution of the SENCO role. The SENCO role has evolved in England over the last 25 years, from a role focused on pedagogy and support for learners to a more strategic leadership role (Ekins 2015). The SENCO role was initially established in the UK in 1994 with the implementation of the SEN Code of Practice (DfE 1994). The Code of Practice was an advisory document to provide clarity on the Education Act (1993) (Dobson and Douglas 2018). The Education Act (1981) heralded that children with SEN had a right to be educated alongside their peers in “ordinary” schools. It was this Act that gave the head teachers the complex task of identifying and supporting children with SEN. The Act did specify that the head teacher could delegate these duties to others in the school whilst still having overall control, which is reflective of current policy guidance in Ireland. The 1994 Code of Practice, which are equivalent to the Irish 2017 guidelines for primary schools for supporting pupils with SEN (DES 2017b), described a role that evolved from the responsibilities issued to the head teacher in the 1981 Education Act and the pre-existing ‘specialist teacher’ (Crowther *et al.* 2001, p. 86). The role continues to evolve in response to policy and statutory changes (Pearson *et al.* 2015). The SENCO role was formalised further when the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (England) Regulations (2008) made it a statutory duty for mainstream schools to employ a SENCO and set out specific qualifications and training for the SENCO (Dobson and Douglas 2018). The SENCO has responsibility for coordinating provision for learners with SEN, and also supports teachers to develop and implement appropriate learning opportunities for these learners. Along with the head teacher and the designated school governor, the SENCO is responsible for the implementation of the school’s SEN policy and the main contact point for parents, external specialists and agencies.

Following on from the Code of Practice (1994), more onerous roles, responsibilities and competencies for future SENCOs was laid out in 1998, by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) as published in the *National Standards for SENCOs*. The TTA identified four areas where coordination is essential for effective SEN provision which are: strategic direction and development of SEN provision in the school; teaching and learning; managing and leading staff; and efficient and effective

deployment of resources (MacKenzie 2007). The coordinators are seen as auditors of SEN provision and are required to seek out opportunities for their own professional development (TTA 1998) and manage and train support staff. However, due to the variances in status of the SENCOs in different settings there is a varied response in practice (Morewood 2012). Variation in practice may be necessary in order to allow for local interpretation aligned to the individual school context.

The idea of a management or a leadership role is implied in the TTA guidelines as there is an assumption that the SENCO will be the agent for achieving a whole-school approach to SEN. There is evidence in the literature that the SENCO role was better defined as a result of the publication of the standards and that the status of SEN was elevated in schools (Cowne 2005). In many schools, research reveals that SENCOs were left feeling ineffective if they were not given the time, resources or opportunities for development to execute the role (Forlin 2001; Cole 2005; Szwed 2007). Abbott (2007) conducted a small-sized qualitative study in Northern Ireland with twelve SENCOs, which examined the scope and main challenges of their work and the extent to which they created inclusive environments. SEN provision is under the same system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The twelve SENCOs had varied experience, were from both primary and post-primary schools, which were varied in terms of size and location. This study found that in the Northern Ireland context, the challenges for the SENCO included bureaucracy, time allocation, resource constraints, little opportunities for professional development for staff and little collaboration with outside agencies.

As further formalisation of the role took place in 2001, Rosen-Webb (2011, p.160) insisted that the revised Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfES 2001) allowed for 'variability in interpretation of the SENCO role'. She argued that the revised Code of Practice both clarified and muddled the role of the SENCO by prioritising leadership and management expertise over good knowledge of SEN. The role was placed in a central position and explicitly linked to leadership without any firm recommendation or direction to appoint SENCOs to leadership teams (Walsh 2020). Rosen-Webb (2011) did give credit to the Code of Practice for providing greater structure and guidance on assessment and provision for learners with SEN.

In 2004, the publication of the UK government's strategy on improving SEN management and provision, *Removing Barriers to Achievement*, increased responsibilities for the SENCO. The linking of class teachers with SEN specialists was brought to the fore as was the recommendation that the SENCO should be a key member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and be able to influence whole-school improvement through policy development (DfES 2004). As the UK government continued to roll out guidance with a universal scope, without detail or direction on how the duties were to be implemented in individual schools or settings (Tissot 2013), it highlights the significance of training for SENCOs to execute their roles with competence and confidence in the provision of SEN (Cowne 2005; Abbott 2007). Despite governments issuing of guidance documents, a high degree of interpretation occurs at a local level (Pearson and Ralph 2007), which may be necessary to reflect the variation in school context, school size, staffing, structural organisation, proportion of pupils with needs, level of funding and access to external agencies.

After the statutory developments of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (England) Regulations (2008) which enforced the employment of a SENCO in each mainstream school, the SENCO was required to complete the induction and the National Standards SENCO (NASENCo) award within three years of being appointed (Dobson and Douglas 2018). This, however, is where the consistency of the SENCO role ended in schools (Dobson and Douglas 2018). They note that there is a history of consistent inconsistency in schools and that within all legislation relating to SEN since 1994, the 'Appropriate Authority', also known as the governing body, and the head teacher are required to determine the role of the SENCO. This, they insist, is one reason that has led to various practices in schools nationally. The 'Appropriate Authority' defines what the SENCOs 'must' do, however immediately following this is a list of SENCO functions, which 'may' but not always be chosen from. These duties are discharged by the 'authority' through the head teacher to schools. A certain degree of ambiguity in policy may be necessary to allow schools a degree of autonomy to shape the role so that it is suited to their particular contexts. This insight would be important to consider for other jurisdictions, such as Ireland.

In addition, variations in interpretation at school level are evident due to the changes in the suggested duties within the various successive iterations of the Code of Practice (DfE, 1994; DfE and the DoH, 2015). As presented below, the current list

includes 11 duties having evolved from the original 6, and are also preceded by ‘may include’ (DfE and DoH 2015, p.108). It may also be a reason why there is a wide variation in practice in how SENCOs operate in schools and why there are inconsistencies in school-based practices, such as varying time to execute the role, administrative overload and their leadership status and thus position to effect change (Dobson and Douglas 2018). As previously indicated variation may be necessary to reflect the individual school context.

In the last re-affirmation of the SENCO role within the revised statutory SEND guidance to schools, the 2015 SEND Code (DfE and DoH 2015) again stated that mainstream schools must appoint a SENCO that is a qualified teacher but it now states that it is with the expectation that they would determine the strategic development of provision for children with SEND, whilst working alongside senior leaders (DfE and DoH 2015).

In its guidance in 2015, the SEND Code of Practice, identifies the SENCO as the person within a school or setting who holds responsibility for the co-ordination of the operations on a day-to-day basis of the special needs policy, the provision and practice for pupils identified with SEN, and also those with Education, Health and Care Plans (DfE and DOH 2015; Dobson and Douglas 2018). It is clear from the key responsibilities of the SENCO listed below that there are many obligations for the SENCO to balance.

The SEND Code of Practice - the key responsibilities of the SENCO that are listed as ‘may include’ are as follows:

- overseeing the day-to day operation of the schools SEN policy;
- co-ordinating provision for children with SEN;
- liaising with the relevant Designated Teacher where a looked after pupil has SEN;
- advising on the graduated approach to providing SEN support;
- advising on the deployment of the school’s delegated budget and other resources to meet pupils’ needs effectively;
- liaising with parents of pupils with SEN;
- liaising with early years providers, other schools, educational psychologists, health and social care professionals, and independent or voluntary bodies;

- being a key point of contact with external agencies, especially the local authority and its support services;
- liaising with potential next providers of education to ensure a pupil and their parents are informed about options and a smooth transition is planned;
- working with the head teacher and school governors to ensure that the school meets its responsibilities under the Equality Act (2010) with regard to reasonable adjustments and access arrangements; and
- ensuring that the school keeps the records of all pupils with SEN up to date.

DfE and DoH (2015, pp. 108-109)

SENCOs have identified that the number and range of duties and responsibilities within the role, brings increased demands on the workload along with a lack of time and funding which negatively impact their capacity to fulfil their role effectively (Curran *et al.* 2018, Curran and Boddison 2021). The role is also challenged through difficulties arising from diverse situational factors, such as school size, geographical location, the number identified with SEN, other responsibilities the SENCO has outside of the SENCO role and the cultural values and beliefs of the school or setting (Cowne *et al.* 2019).

Research in England has explored the SENCO identity and typology. Woolhouse's (2012) mixed-methods qualitative study in England sought to provide insight into how teachers are involved in socially constructing their own personal realities. The study found that SENCOs viewed themselves as 'caring warriors'. Kearns (2005) outlines a typology, which acknowledges the varying approaches to the SENCO role, which still holds currency today. Kearns undertook a small-scale qualitative case study with eighteen SENCOs in primary schools in Northern Ireland. The study sought to assist SENCOs to identify opportunities for situated learning (to learn on the job) and ascertain the possibilities for accredited learning projects at Master's level. Through SENCO narratives, individual interviews and focus group workshops, he pinpointed patterns of development and change in how the SENCO role was enacted.

The development of five SENCO role types resulted from the analysis of Kearns' study, which he accentuates are not considered definitive and many SENCOs

felt they held various respective roles. Kearns (2005) outlined varying approaches to the SENCO role and these are known as SENCO Typologies. These are as follows:

SENCO as Arbiter: Focused on negotiating, rationalising and monitoring the use of resources; helping others such as teachers and parents to feel positive and clarify their concerns and aspire to raise their confidence in the school. Use a range of information sources to facilitate colleagues' professional development and to manage parents' demands.

SENCO as Rescuer: Focused on supporting pupils with learning difficulties and planning appropriate programmes. Intensely reflect about pupils and use every possible source of information or ideas about teaching low attaining pupils for their personal use rather than for the development of colleagues. Strong empathy for teachers and pupils in need and learning occurs due to working with individual pupils and direct communication with teachers instead of shared practice.

SENCO as Auditor: Focused on managerial aspects of identifying and assessment of pupils with special needs. Involved in developing effective administration of recording action and progress, emphasis on the management of centralising individual pupil plans, meeting, policies, initiatives and meeting legal requirements. Feeling supported and personally developed by bureaucratic frameworks within the role.

SENCO as Collaborator: Focused on working collaboratively with both large and small groups of teachers for review planning and evaluation purposes. Openness to meeting pupils from within and outside the school on areas, such as staff development and curriculum development for diverse pupils in mainstream classes. Keen to persuade teachers and management to support change in the promotion and development of whole-school inclusive curricula and practice and this is accepted as their role in the school.

SENCO as Expert: Focused on teaching pupils with specific or severe disabilities and holding additional and specialist qualifications. Responsible for special units attached to mainstream schools, emphasis is on detailed assessment, extensive collaboration and intense care of pupils. Learning is highly individualised and ongoing in respect of each pupil.

Over time, the role has evolved due to changes in statutory requirements and a reaction to policy changes (Pearson *et al.* 2015) and to changes in schools, demographic changes, and increased number of children and young people with SEND. Curran and Boddison (2021) maintain, in light of the research findings from an online survey of 1,903 participant SENCOs that the role remains disparate in practice and variances occur due to local interpretation of national guidance, with no guidance on how to specifically facilitate the role, which is similar in the Irish context. They reported that research, which was the first in its kind since the introduction of SEND reforms in England in 2014, has identified that historical challenges still pervade the SENCO role. The research explored the nature of the role, post-SEND reform from the perspective of the SENCO across differing educational settings and phases. Specifically, the SENCO demographic, in terms of other posts held in school, time in the role, the breadth and extent of the role and varying experiences of the SENCO in terms of workload and the impact of this on the SENCO and their setting were explored. It is reported by Curran and Boddison (2021) that SENCOs hold multiple roles in addition to the SENCO role. It was found that over half of all respondents (54%) held teaching responsibilities. Interestingly variations occurred across phases where 48% of primary SENCOs held teaching responsibilities, whilst this increased to 78% for secondary SENCOs. It was reported that only 8% of respondents had no other responsibilities other than the SENCO role. SENCOs also held other roles concurrently such as safeguarding lead, designated teacher for looked after children and English as an additional language, which all suggest a widening of the role for children that are vulnerable.

Hallett and Hallett (2017) also suggested that there is disparate enactment of the role. The SEND Code of Practice (2015) states that SENCOs are required to have ‘sufficient time’ to undertake the role (DfE and DoH 2015, p.109). Curran *et al.* (2018) report that their research illustrated that there are significant variations in the time allocated to the role, in that primary SENCOs cited that 0.5-1 day per week was the most common amount of allocated time, whereas secondary SENCOs cited 3-3.5 days per week were allocated to the role. An over-whelming 70% of all SENCOs felt they did not have enough time to fulfil their role with 74% reporting that they frequently felt frustrated by the lack of time to fulfil their role. Within this body of research, it was also found that 78% of SENCOs felt competing priorities and other activities

pulled them away from their SENCO focused work, such as supporting staff with behaviour management issues and designated teacher tasks. Despite being formalised challenges still exist in England for the SENCO role which could potentially be alleviated through a systematic, collaborative, distributed and collective team approach to SEN coordination.

It was also found that support in facilitating the role varied with 9% of primary SENCOs reporting support from an assistant or deputy SENCO in comparison to 32% of secondary SENCOs reporting this support (Curran *et al.* 2018). It is interesting that only 26% of all the SENCOs felt that the role was manageable for one person. It is reported by Cowne *et al.* (2019) that to support all aspects of the SENCO role, there is a need for accomplished communication and organisational competences, as well as support for the administrative aspects of the role. Curran *et al.* (2018) identified in their research that 71% of SENCOs stated that administrative tasks, such as data analysis, referral completion and annual paperwork accounted for most of their time, with meetings regarding annual reviews and meetings with external agencies and parents being the second most time-consuming activity. Soan in 2017 maintained that ‘SENCOs are to be considered a point of contact or advisor, rather than the professional who has the responsibility to carry out the actions alone’ (Soan 2017, p. 16). Curran and Boddison (2021) suggested that a lack of nationally standardised statutory processes and required paperwork may contribute to an increased workload for the SENCO role. Having access to qualified administrative support, that may for example arrange meetings with external meetings and collate profiling information, could offload some of the workload of SENCOs and allow them to focus on strategic leadership aspects of the role.

Given that the SENCO role is considered to be both operational and strategic in terms of overseeing provision for children with SEND (DfE and DoH 2015) it could be suggested that the role is both a management role and a leadership role (Girelli *et al.* 2019). It is stated within the 2015 SEND Code that SENCOs will be most effective in the SENCO role if they are a part of the leadership team within the school (DfE and DoH 2015, p.108), yet it does not specifically say that the SENCO must or should be a part of the SLT. However, Curran *et al.* (2018) in their research reported that just over 50% of the SENCOs indicated that they were part of the SLT, due to their SENCO role. Variances occurred between sectors as 62% of primary SENCOs reported being

part of the SLT in comparison to only 21% of secondary SENCOs. Curran and Boddison (2021) note that this variation may reflect differences in school structures, as many secondary schools reported having inclusion leads at senior level or across multi-academy trusts. It is also noted that the distinction and interpretation of the terms school leader as opposed to senior leader may determine how the role is positioned within a school leadership structure. It is suggested in the findings of Curran *et al.* (2018) that in secondary education, strategic development of SEN policy is specifically more problematic given the differences in primary and secondary membership of the SLT.

Curran and Boddison (2021) note that findings from research undertaken by Curran *et al.* (2018) demonstrate that the SENCO has potential to be an agent of change and develop inclusive practices in schools. However, this is crucially based on the notion of positional leadership and ensuring that SENCOs are allocated “sufficient time” to meet the demands of their role as set out in the guidance (DfE and DoH, 2015p. 109).

The literature demonstrates the complexity and multifaceted nature of the role and also the wider responsibilities of the school community or setting. For the SENCO to be strategic leads for SEN there is a need for shared ownership and responsibility for SEN and whole-school cultures need to be developed (Middleton and Kay 2021). Boddison (2018) maintains that it is through whole-school ownership of SEN that effective leadership and provision for special education is facilitated. As the SENCOs are now strategic leaders for the provision in SEN, individuals that they work with need to be very clear in relation to their SENCO responsibilities and a shared consensus about the specific responsibilities of the role of the SENCO, as this can act as a barrier or a facilitator in developing effective practice (Ekins 2015; Garner 2018). Curran and Boddison (2021) report from their research that 53% of primary SENCOs and 46% of secondary SENCOs felt that senior managers understood their role. As international policy regarding the SENCO role notes, leadership reflects the position of the leader, as well as how that position is perceived by others (Struyve *et al.*, 2018). The inclusion of the SENCO on the SLT is a critical determinant for whole-school ownership (Middleton and Kay 2021), but also the SLT needs to be steadfast in their commitment to inclusive practices and creating opportunities for continuous professional development (Garner 2018).

It is clear from the literature that a component of the SENCO role is to lead and ensure accountability in providing quality teaching that allows for progress in learning for pupils with SEN (Packer 2015). With this in mind, Middleton and Kay (2021) highlight the importance of including SEN in the schools monitoring systems and procedures rather than monitoring SEN in separate processes. This could also provide a reason for the SENCO to be part of the SLT team (Glazzard *et al.* 2015). According to Cowne *et al.* (2019) another component of the SENCO role is auditing and strengthening teacher's knowledge, understanding and competencies to manage diverse learning needs, and planning for CPD (Soan 2017), which is in agreement with a role 'type' found by Kearns' study in 2005. SENCOs are also accountable for the deployment of resources either human, physical or financial to meet the needs of learners with SEN. Soan (2017) insists that this highlights the importance of being able to analyse and understand data to advocate for pupils with SEN when planning and reviewing pupil progress. Whilst acting as an advocate, SENCOs need to work in partnership with pupils, parents and external agencies as effective partnerships are critical to support the Graduated Approach and develop a deep understanding of individual profiles and ensure high quality provision (Parker 2015). The Graduated Approach is a system of SEN support within mainstream schools in England by which schools identify and assess the needs of children and then provide the relevant support, and is similar to the Continuum of Support and problem-solving approach in the Irish context (NEPS 2007). This system involves four stages which is often viewed as a 'cycle' and these stages are as follows: Assess-Plan-Do-Review (Parker 2015).

The SENCO is a key policy implementer of SEN in schools in England (Curran 2019) and strategic operational leadership is now seen as an essential aspect of the SENCO role (Soan 2017) yet as mentioned, many SENCOs do not hold a senior leadership position in their school or setting (Curran *et al.* 2018). As Curran and Boddison (2021) outline, the SENCO role has a long-standing complexity of being perceived as a low status and operational role rather than a senior, strategic management level role in England. This is still problematic today when considering the wider intention of the role to strategically strengthen inclusive policy in schools (Curran and Boddison 2021). As set out in the 2015 SEND code (DfE and DoH 2015), the provision for children with additional needs is a collective responsibility, and it has in the past been highlighted that it is not considered inclusive practice to have one

sole person responsible for SEN in a school (Layton 2005; Oldham and Radford 2011). It is suggested that best practice holds the role of the SENCO at the centre of the education processes occurring within a setting (Hallett and Hallett 2017).

2.8.2 Role of the SENCO in other international countries

In this section research on the SENCO role in various international countries, namely Sweden, Greece, Finland, Netherlands, Spain and New Zealand, where this role exists and where research has been undertaken is outlined.

In Sweden, special education teachers and special pedagogues (SENCOs) are two occupational groups that work with pupils in need of specialist support. These two groups comprise the profession of special needs educators (SNEs), which is not regulated by the State or recognised in any other legal document (Klang *et al.* 2017). The training for both groups encompasses the same amount of credits and according to the Swedish Degree Ordinances the training goals for both groups encompass development of skills to conduct preventative work, conduct assessments and document individual education plans, supervise and advise others, evaluate and lead pedagogical work for all pupils' needs. The goals of the special education teachers are more concerned with pupils learning and development whereas the goals of the special pedagogues focus more on school organisation and collaboration with others (Klang *et al.* 2017), which is similar to the role of the SENCO in the UK (Lindqvist 2013).

In a total population study in Sweden, Goransson *et al.* (2015) reported on an overview of special educators' work (SENCOs and special education teachers). The study investigated special educators' perceptions of their role, their preparedness for the role and how their role is practiced. Interestingly the study highlighted questions about special educators' knowledge and values as well as their grounds to claim special expertise related to the identification of needs, and working with 'school difficulties' (Goransson *et al.* 2015, p.287). In 2012, the questionnaire was sent to 4,252 participants, and the majority (4,037) of the respondents were SENCOs. The results found that the group is characterised by a belief that the school's main mission in general is to contribute to an equal and equitable society (81.9%) and that the school should prioritise pupils' personal development (75.5%). The group was not characterised by a school's main mission being to contribute to a competitive society

where personal freedom and responsibility are emphasised (17.7% responded that this is the school's main mission). Special educators in this study embraced a relational view of providing support for children in need or children that have 'school difficulties' (Goransson *et al.* 2015). In stating the reasons for school difficulties, 95.7% of special educators reported that preschools/schools have difficulty adapting to pupils' differences, 91.8% reported that some teachers' skills are insufficient and 84.1% reported that some groups/ classes do not function effectively. Forty-three and a half per cent replied that a pupil's individual 'deficiencies' were the reason for needing support, but 82.3% replied that a medical diagnosis should not be important to get such support. This study reported that special educators perceive that their knowledge rests on sound scientific basis and covers skills to support all children's differences within a class. They also report having good knowledge in relation to counselling, consultation, leading dialogue with colleagues, parents and stakeholders, and working preventively in order to lead school development. It is also reported that they have good knowledge and skills in educating pupils individually and in groups especially in the area of identification and evaluation but not so in identifying and evaluating individuals' critical thinking and learning goals. Seventy per cent of special educators believed that their education provided them with skills in documentation and evaluation at the individual and group level of special education but fewer believed the same is true at school or municipal level (Goransson *et al.* 2015). It is worth noting that in Sweden there are no steering documents containing definitions on SENCOs/ special educators' tasks or on school difficulties or special support so it may be unlikely for such groups to be prepared and possess all knowledge related to school supports (Lindqvist 2013).

Goransson *et al.* (2015) maintained that special educators do not execute tasks to the same extent in school development as they represent values that are contradictory to the educational agenda that is striving for excellence. According to Goransson *et al.* (2015), the results relating to work tasks indicated that special educators might have grounds to claim special expertise in some areas but not in others and that the work of SENCOs varies depending on where in the school organisation they are situated. Context is important when considering how and to what extent SENCOs are successful in claiming their expertise. This explains why some level of autonomy in role interpretation may be required as it recognises the variability across

contexts. Goransson *et al.* (2015) also argued that special educators are the only occupational group in the school that explain school difficulties from a relational point of view, which can limit opportunities to change other groups' views. In Sweden, the legal responsibility for the provision of SEN in school's rests with the school's head teacher. SENCOs or special education teachers are not mentioned in the Education Act, which is the most prescriptive document for the school system in Sweden. Goransson *et al.* (2015) noted that suggestions that special educators have difficulties claiming jurisdictional control over the field of special education are substantiated when considering that the occupational groups of SENCOs and special education teachers were created by the State, and not by a need expressed by other organisational groups in the school system.

In a small-scale study by Klang *et al.* (2017), six participants were selected from a survey of SNEs in ten Swedish municipalities with the aim of exploring how professional roles were enacted in different school contexts. Seven major work tasks were identified; namely teaching, establishing and maintaining social relations with others, following up and informing teachers on pupil cases, supporting and providing materials and school development and practical chores. It was noted in this study that three of the work tasks were supervisory in nature, such as social relations work, informing others and following up on cases and supporting and providing materials but teachers had the expectations that SNEs should be more involved in the classroom. Six roles were distinguished from this study, social counsellor, systemic investigator, supervising maths teacher, inspection teacher, executive supporting teacher and school developer. Only two out of the six participants attended meetings in relation to school development. Klang *et al.* (2017) noted that in Sweden, the tasks of SNEs are stipulated in degree ordinances from their university but not in the Education Act and the consequences are that the intended SNE role put forward through their university training may not be realised in schools. This disconnect between policy and formal teacher professional learning for special education may cause ambiguity and confusion for schools. This disconnect is also evident in other jurisdictions, such as Ireland. In this study, it is indicated that the SEN roles were shaped by the SNEs themselves, the Principal and colleagues' conceptions of their work and the school's organisational structure.

Struyve *et al.* (2018) completed a small-scale study on how the position of the SENCO and the responsibilities attached to it are negotiated within schools in Sweden. The findings of this study illustrated that three themes related to how the SENCO-as teacher-lead is negotiated in schools, which includes, possessing expertise and being recognised as the expert, being surrounded by teacher colleagues that see themselves as first line helpers, and being supported by the school Principal to take the lead in special needs care. These themes can help to understand whether the SENCO receives legitimacy to lead other school members and influence the teachers' actions regarding special needs provision in their classroom and school (Struyve *et al.* 2018).

In Greece, SENCOs have not officially been introduced in the Greek educational system. Qualified support teachers that have experience in teaching pupils with SEN either in support rooms or with their classroom are often tasked with assuming the unofficial role of the SENCO, which is similar in Ireland. The support teachers are often expected to give their professional opinions to their general education colleagues on various issues relating to supporting pupils with SEN (Agaliotis and Kalyva 2011). A study aimed at identifying the key factors defining the role of the SENCO in Greek schools, which involved 228 special education teachers and 238 general teachers, found that there was consensus from both groups that all schools should have a full-time SENCO trained in general and special education. Agaliotis and Kalyva (2011) recommended that official guidelines be provided to schools regarding the caseload of SENCOs to assist in the facilitation of a focus on a strategic coordinating aspect of the role. It was recommended that SENCOs would be effective in supporting the needs of pupils with SEN and their families if the role was a manageable role with clear rights and unambiguous responsibilities (Agaliotis and Kalyva 2011).

In Finland, the work of special education teachers seems to be in ways similar to that of SENCOs in the UK (Takala *et al.* 2009). In a study, which used a survey and observational approach with 133 special education teachers, Takala *et al.* (2009) reported that the work of special education teachers consisted of three elements: teaching pupils individually or in small groups, and consulting and background work. The main challenges experienced by teachers were the lack of time for consultation and co-operation, an unclear work profile and excessive work. The Finnish model of special education is inclusive in that the pupil has easy access to support, no formal

decisions are necessary, no special status is given to the pupil and they attend for support for a limited period of time. However, the support is often by way of the pull-out system due to no supportive organisational structures for co-operation and also no time for planning, co-teaching or for consultation (Takala *et al.* 2009). It was reported that the work of the special education teachers is demanding, isolating and exhausting.

In the Netherlands in 1990, a new start was made to integrating pupils with SEN and the appointment of special service coordinators, following publication of the Governments' policy document 'Together to Schools Again'. The service coordinators had the dual role of coordinating services for pupils with SEN at a class and school level and acting as a consultant for change by way of supporting teachers (Imants *et al.* 2001). A study by Van Leeuwem *et al.* (2013) was conducted on the impact of the policy, 'Appropriate Education', which set out to provide equality in relation to funding for pupils with SEN in the Netherlands. It was suggested that support and guidance in relation to effective use of resources should be made available to mainstream schools to respond to the rising number of pupils with SEN in mainstream education.

In Spain, following the Law for the Organisation of the Educational System (1990) the support teachers' role was envisaged to evolve from one where support was given to pupils with SEN on an individual basis to one that would develop programmes with class teachers in preventative measures for learning difficulties. The role would also involve monitoring curricular modifications and consulting with class teachers with specialised advice. As noted by Arnaiz and Castejon (2001) this role was envisaged to be very similar to that of the SENCO in the UK where the role would entail supporting the classroom as a whole, adapting the curriculum, coordinating and developing learning activities with the class teacher, consulting and advising class teachers, assessing and identifying learning difficulties, and monitoring changes to the curriculum. In a study of 136 support teachers, Arnaiz and Castejon (2001) found that in practice the role of the teacher providing support for SEN pupils involved teaching individuals and small groups outside of the main classroom. It was recommended in this study that responsibility for SEN pupils be shared throughout the school.

While New Zealand is known for a highly inclusive education system which is underpinned by a series of legislation and policies, as like many other countries,

schools vary in the interpretation and practice of inclusive education (Hornby 2015), including how the SENCO role is implemented (Lin *et al.* 2022). In New Zealand, even though policy discourses recognise SENCOs as key to the inclusive education system, the SENCO role is not formally recognised or funded by the Ministry of Education (MoE) (New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) 2018). Schools make their own decisions on how the SENCO role is funded either as a permanent fixed term, full-time or part-time role and the activities and the amount of time allocated to their roles vary in schools, which is similar to Ireland (NZEI) 2018). Kearney *et al.* (2017) conducted an online survey of New Zealand SENCOs, which aimed to gain insight into how the SENCO role has manifested itself in schools in New Zealand. This study suggested that the lack of formal policy regarding the SENCO role has resulted in the SENCO potentially having ‘high level of autonomy, flexibility and agency’ (Kearney *et al.* 2017 p.130). The authors further suggested that this may contribute to the SENCO’s confidence and satisfaction in conducting their role. This study also identified four types of SENCO identity from their survey in New Zealand which are the ‘coordinator’, ‘support person’, ‘advocate for students’, and ‘inter-professional change agent’ (Kearney *et al.* 2017). As the SENCO is a dynamic and complex role, Lin *et al.* (2022) in their small-scale study of five primary schools sought more understanding about SENCOs’ identity through emotion. The study sought to understand what ‘kind of person’ the SENCO is, and their ‘ways of being’ in order to make sense of their experiences in the role of SENCO (Lin *et al.* 2022 p. 91). The study reported that the participants saw themselves as being advocates, problem solvers, learners and fighters and it was reported that each ‘kind of person’ was not mutually exclusive.

Lin *et al.* (2022), in their study revealed that SENCOs experienced significant amounts of positive and negative feelings while enacting their role. The findings demonstrated that when SENCOs were able to enact identities of the ‘five kinds of person’, they had positive emotions including job satisfaction, passion and confidence yet when they were undermined due to a lack of resources or what they perceived as uncooperative parents, they experienced frustration and stress. Lin *et al.* (2022) maintained that SENCOs in New Zealand experience a high degree of job satisfaction and are committed to the role even though there is a lack of formal recognition and funding for the role. The research indicates what ‘kind of person’ may fit the SENCO

role when recruiting SENCOs, allow current SENCOs to confirm their place in the role and it also highlights the importance of providing SENCOs with emotional support. It is recommended that the establishment and development of SENCO affinity groups (SENCO Forums) to share practice and give emotional support across schools could support SENCOs. In addition, Lin *et al.* (2022) asserted that school leaders play a central role in supporting SENCOs by allocating sufficient time to the SENCO role, funding it as a full-time role, supporting professional development and building collegial support.

A new development occurred in July 2019 when the New Zealand government implemented a new, fully funded role solely for assisting pupils with SEN in accessing learning support services, the role being called Learning Support Coordinator (LSC) (MoE 2019). In January 2020, 1,000 schools were allocated 600 LSCs with more funding to follow to increase this. Unlike the SENCO role, the new LSC role has a standardised role description (MoE 2019) with responsibilities that overlap with those of the SENCO. The government did not allocate funding directly to SENCO positions as these positions are funded directly by schools themselves and many SENCOs fulfil other roles alongside that of the SENCO role. It is at the school's discretion if they want to remain funding the SENCO role in addition to the LSC role (MoE 2019). This development regarding the LSC role may potentially pose a threat to the future funding of the SENCO role by schools.

In summary, there is congruence across countries regarding the evolution and status of the SENCO role and the challenges faced by the SENCOs in their role enactment. While there is evidence to suggest that SENCOs feel a sense of fulfilment in their role there is also a sense of isolation and frustration due to the various challenges that they encounter. In some countries, SENCOs feel that the job could be shared across the school system to alleviate some of these challenges. Many of the key findings from the international literature are reflective of the SENCO landscape in Ireland. Internationally, the role has organically evolved in many countries with the special education teacher often taking on the SENCO responsibility due to their position and expertise. Apart from England, the role is not formalised or recognised in the education system of various countries, such as Finland, Spain, Netherlands, Sweden, Greece and New Zealand. There is significant variation in SENCO role interpretation and practice across all jurisdictions with many SENCOs having limited

involvement in senior leadership roles and strategic school development. SENCOs across all countries face similar challenges, which include bureaucracy, extensive workload, limited relevant professional development, holding multiple roles, combining the role with teaching responsibilities and limited collaboration with outside agencies. Often the role has been viewed as having low status and being an operational role. Finally, it is evident across countries that there is a need to support SENCOs through formal role recognition, the provision of time to execute the role, the provision of appropriate professional development and the development of communities of practice. Interestingly through Kearney *et al.* (2017) commented that the lack of formalisation potentially creates autonomy and flexibility and a high level of agency. It was important to conduct this review of the international literature to provide an overview of the evolution, status and realities of the SENCO role from this international perspective. This would thus allow for an exploration of the role in the Irish context, in the next section, through this international comparative lens and the assessment of the extent to which the Irish context is reflective of the international realities of the SENCO role.

2.9 Evolution of the SENCO Role in the Irish Context

Internationally the drive towards inclusive education has brought about changes to the organisation of schools and the creation of new roles and responsibilities (Fitzgerald 2015). In Ireland and across the globe, there have been many changes to roles in the area of SEN. The changing roles in the provision of SEN and the roles of teachers that work with children and young people identified with additional needs is ever evolving. The paradigmatic shift away from psycho-medical models to the bio-psychosocial model in policy and practice (NEPS 2007, 2010; NCSE 2019; Shevlin and Banks 2021) has brought many changes to schools. In Ireland this shift is evident in the SERC Report (1993), the Education Act (1998), the EPSEN Act (2004) and now through the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (SETAM) which aimed to replace systems that pathologise children and young people using labels and prioritises a needs based approach to additional resource allocations to schools (NCSE 2014; Rose *et al.* 2015; DES 2017a; DE 2024). This section will provide an overview of this evolution

up to the current model, namely the SETAM, and how these changes have evolved and impacted on the SENCO role in the Irish context.

Over the years, more pupils with SEN are attending mainstream primary schools due to policy and legislative changes, which has impacted the roles of those managing SEN in schools. NEPS was established in 1999 to provide supports to schools and to provide assessments. In Ireland no formal recognition of the SENCO role in a policy context exists, and little support or direction has been given on how it should be enacted. The *Learning Support Guidelines* (DES 2000) set out that the Principal would have overall responsibility for developing and implementing school policy on learning support and special needs service. The Principal could also coordinate the provision of these services themselves or nominate another teacher to undertake this coordination, such as a learning support teacher (supporting pupils experiencing low achievement and/or learning difficulties (DES 2000)), resource teacher (supporting pupils with complex needs), or post of responsibility holder. The tasks outlined that were assigned to this role included: maintaining a list of pupils receiving additional support; assisting in coordinating the caseloads and timetabling of support teachers; supporting the implementation of a record system at whole-school level to monitor children's progress; liaising with external agencies; and advising parents on SEN services and arranging resources (DES 2000). The duties that were outlined in Ireland at this point were similar in nature to the Code of Practice (1994) in England, except for the inclusion of the SENCO assisting in-service training of staff, as this was not outlined in *Learning Support Guidelines* (DES 2000).

The Special Education Support Service (SESS) was set up in 2003, (which is now amalgamated within the NCSE) to address the then rather fragmented provision of professional development for those working in the area of special education. The management of SEN, the development of SEN policy and the overall administration of the provision of SEN for school Principals and in-school management teams had proven to be daunting tasks (INTO 2003). The report *Supporting Special Education in Mainstream School* (INTO 2003), outlined the need for the appointment of coordinators to assume responsibility for curricular policy, resource planning and management and developing staff with a view to assisting in the formulation of whole-school policy on special needs (INTO 2003). In the years that followed there were legal and structural changes to address concerns that schools had in the management

and provision of SEN. The EPSEN Act (2004) took the view that SEN would focus on the effects of a disability rather than the cause and ensured the provision of inclusive education unless there was a specific reason a pupil required a specialised placement. The EPSEN Act brought significant changes in systemic organisation, as the NCSE was established and was now responsible for many areas of school provision of SEN and providing advice to government (Griffin and Shevlin 2007).

In 2005, more changes came for those managing the provision of SEN. Circular 02/05 introduced the General Allocation Model (GAM), which aimed to provide resources to respond to SEN in primary schools (DES 2005). Every school's resources were now determined by factors such as gender, socio-economic disadvantage and size. Resource teaching hours continued to be allocated to pupils that were assessed as having complex needs based on professional assessment reports along with a SENO's evaluation of the application. With a need to provide for an increasingly diverse range of pupils in inclusive school settings (Banks *et al.* 2016), there was a significant growth in the number of learning support teacher or resource teachers, now amalgamated into the SET role, in mainstream schools who were tasked with the responsibility of providing additional supports to pupils with SEN. Despite this growth no guidance was provided on the leadership of this provision or the formalisation of a coordinating role.

Over the years changes in policy have given rise to the need for a 'coordinating teacher' in some schools, who can manage timetables, oversee and lead SEN teams and SEN provision in schools (DES 2007). There were more calls from reports for the appointment of SEN co-ordinators in schools. Travers *et al.* (2010) in his research which was related to the barriers to inclusion in Irish schools, reported results from a case study undertaken in three primary schools and three post-primary schools. It was noted by Travers *et al.* (2010) that schools should appoint coordinators of special education and that they should have a post of responsibility, be part of the leadership team and be required to undertake mandatory professional development. The report identified that in order to develop and improve SEN policies and practices in the school, the relationship between the SEN coordinator and the Principal was crucial to create a force for inclusion. It was found that the relationship was instrumental to providing direction, energy, vision and structure within the school. Ware *et al.* (2011) in their study which was carried out on behalf of the NCSE, *Access to the Curriculum*

for Pupils with a Variety of Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Classes, also called for the coordination of SEN to have a post of responsibility within the school structure. It was reported in this study that the person would need to be an assistant or Deputy Principal in larger schools and that the person responsible for this coordination would be an important factor in supporting the school community and creating an inclusive environment that was seen as the norm.

Travers *et al.* (2010) maintained that the success of new inclusive practices and initiatives within the three primary schools of their study was due to the Principals implementing a policy of distributed leadership. According to Travers *et al.* (2010), the relationship between the Principal and the SEN coordinator helped to establish expectations and a culture of inclusive practices across many of the schools. It was found that coordinators, due to this type of leadership, mentored staff and supported colleagues by facilitating and engaging in discussions on new inclusive practices and initiatives.

One of the most extensive studies undertaken in Ireland, which was a large-scale mixed-methods study that collected data from 816 schools, was by O’Gorman and Drudy (2011) and explored the professional development needs of SEN teachers in Ireland. In response to a questionnaire, data were collected from 196 primary Principals, 212 post-primary Principals, 417 primary and 399 post-primary LS/SEN teachers. In this study 73% of primary schools reported having a SENCO in their school, while 91% of post-primary reported having a SENCO. The study identified and prioritised that LS/SEN Teachers required professional development in areas of individual education plans, general upskilling, information on various disabilities and diagnosis and assessment. The study highlighted a concern regarding the emphasis on ‘developing individual expertise rather than the need for distributed expertise to enkindle a culture of inclusivity among the whole-school community’ (O’Gorman and Drudy 2011, p.165). O’ Gorman and Drudy (2011) maintained that the qualitative data indicated that there is a need for a SEN advisor in schools, and that if SENCOs were appointed to every school their duties could encompass the organisation of professional learning for teachers. This professional learning would highlight the importance of collaborating with colleagues, parents and other professionals. They also held the view that this could result in a collaborative culture being developed in schools as each teacher has the responsibility of educating all children in their class.

O’Gorman and Drudy (2011) asserted that the SENCO role should have clearly articulated responsibilities to establish a boundary but not to curtail its development in the future. They maintained that it is important to have flexibility in role definition which concurs with Kearns’ (2005). Kearns (2005) also maintained that the SENCO role types that he derived from his analysis are not definitive as many roles reside with the SENCO. The study also indicated that there was an urgent need for specific professional learning for the key promoters of inclusion, to adapt and improve instruction and to keep informed on policy change. It was recommended that SENCOs’ leadership and management function should be acknowledged and that they should be a part of the management team within schools. They maintained that SENCOs should take responsibility for the co-ordination of special education in the school and act as a type of a ‘consultancy service for teachers giving advice on inclusive pedagogy’ (O’Gorman and Drudy 2011, p.203) which concurs with Hallett’s (2022) view of SENCOs as pedagogical leads in schools. SENCOs as pedagogical leads adopt a role where they are able to lead ‘inclusive pedagogies’ through a whole-school approach to special education (Hallett 2022). The focus by the SENCOs on the development of inclusive pedagogies empowers them to develop their role in a manner that firmly embeds them in curricular and pedagogical domains. (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). Ware *et al.* (2011) asserted that once given a post of responsibility in schools, SENCOs should then have relevant professional development for this role. O’Gorman and Drudy (2011), reported that in relation to professional development in the provision of SEN they found that block release to attend a college or university programme was most popular but also reported that teachers and Principals emphasised the benefits of collegial discussions, networking and practical experience being the optimum way to develop their skills in teaching.

In 2014, in light of a new system being proposed for children with SEN, the need for professional development of teachers was reflected in the document published by the NCSE, *Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs: A better and more Equitable way*. The policy advice recommended that any teachers assigned a support role should have training to assess and teach all pupils with SEN and also be able to assist other teachers in the preparation and implementation of interventions. There was no suggestion in policy advice to appoint a single coordinator to be responsible for leading the provision of SEN in schools. It did however, outline

that schools would ‘adopt a whole-school approach’ to providing education to pupils with SEN and that professional development should be ‘specifically designed for Principals who will require support in managing the process’ (NCSE 2014, p. 52). Even though schools were not formally required to designate a teacher to coordinate and manage SEN provision in schools, there is strong evidence that learning support and resource teachers (now known as SETs) were undertaking duties related to the management of provision in school (Kinsella *et al.* 2014; Walsh 2020).

The Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (SETAM), which outlines the arrangement of additional resource allocation in schools in line with a needs-based approach (NCSE 2014; DES 2017a; DES 2017d; DE 2024) has further changed the approaches and management of the provision of SEN in schools. The SETAM seeks to facilitate flexibility in the deployment of teaching support as needs emerge (NCSE 2014). The SETAM has increased teacher autonomy through the management of and deployment of additional teaching support for those with the greatest need, without the requirement for individual diagnosis (DES 2017a; DES 2017d; DE 2024). In the past, teachers have worked in discrete ways with children and young people as remedial teachers (deficit/medical model of disability), then becoming learning support and resource teachers (categorical model of disability) and more recently SETs (bio-psychosocial model). With the increase in the deployment of SETs and the expansion of special and inclusive education, this has created new administrative layers (Fitzgerald 2015) and the need for a SEN coordinating role.

In the SETAM guidance document in 2017, *Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs Guidelines for Primary Schools* (DES 2017b) it is outlined that a ‘whole-school approach to special educational needs provision should reflect the Department’s commitment to the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools’ (DES 2017b, p. 21). It is outlined that schools should adopt a whole-school approach to programme planning and that schools need to adapt their existing special educational needs policies. This would guide new whole-school collaborative approaches and would enable school leaders and teachers to review planning, policy and practices in identifying pupils with SEN, intervention planning, teaching and measuring and monitoring the outcomes for pupils with SEN. There was guidance relating to the role of the class teacher and the role of the SETs in relation to effective teaching and learning and also to the Principal’s leadership role. The

guidelines affirmed the role of the Principal and that ‘the Principal retains overall responsibility for the school’s provision with special education’, and that ‘depending on school size and context, some of these duties will be delegated to teams of staff or other members of staff’ (DES 2017b, p.23). No reference, however, is made to a specific formalised SENCO role to lead the support of pupils with SEN.

The circular to the management of all primary schools, *Special Education Teaching Allocation for Primary Schools* (DES 2017a) did not specify any guidance in relation to a member of the teaching staff being given the responsibility for the planning for the provision of SEN. This is in contrast to the guidance that was outlined in the circular, *The Special Education Teaching Allocation for all Post Primary Schools* (DES 2017d). This circular set out that schools should establish and maintain a core team of teachers for SEN, a team that has experience and ongoing access to professional development to support the diverse needs of students with SEN. It also set out that a member of the SEN team ‘might’ be assigned a planning role, which would have the responsibility for planning the provision for SEN within the school (DES 2017b).

Roles and responsibilities have changed in relation to the measurement of progress and review of outcomes for pupils with additional needs. The SETAM emphasises a whole-school collaborative approach and underlines the importance of school self-evaluation (Fitzgerald 2022) as schools undertake school-generated and data informed whole-school profiling of need (DES 2017a; DES 2017d). Today, the Irish system still does not formally designate specific personnel to carry out the tasks outlined in policy guidelines, unlike that in the English system. It is at the discretion of the Principal, with no specific direction regarding the level of qualification or requirement of a qualification to undertake the role of coordinating SEN provision in schools. There is a challenge as to how the SENCO role is conceptualised and is enacted in schools. As the role is not formalised, it is at the discretion of the schools to include a position of SENCO as a post of responsibility in the school.

2.9.1 Review of the SENCO role in Ireland: Practices, roles and responsibilities

As the role of those coordinating provision of SEN in our schools in Ireland continues to evolve it is interesting to look to research undertaken to explore what the roles and

responsibilities are of those tasked with managing SEN in our schools. A small-scale study undertaken by Walsh (2020) explored how support teachers contribute to the leadership and management of SEN provision in mainstream primary schools. The study involved a case study approach with eight schools, the participants included eight Principals and eight SETs. The data were generated through focus group interviews, followed by one-to-one interviews with SETs and Principals and reflective diaries were maintained by SETs. As the scale of this study is small, it would not be fully reflective of all primary Principals and SETs in Ireland, but it is worthy of mentioning as the schools chosen represented a wide diversity of school types and findings, while not generalisable, may be transferrable. The study identified the extent to which SETs lead and manage SEN provision in schools, while achieving a balance between supporting pupils and staff. Six key themes emerged from the study in relation to SET responsibilities which were, in order of reference: planning (meetings for planning, time for administration and planning and recording and implementing decisions made); organisation of team teaching; implementation of the revised model; induction and management of SNAs; withdrawal of pupils for additional support with very specific learning needs and teaching English as an additional language (EAL); and the management of pupil enrolment, including transition from pre-school setting to primary and primary to secondary level. It is evident that there are comparisons to be made with Kearns (2005) typology of roles in this research, as those who are responsible for leading and managing SEN in schools are acting as ‘SENCO as Collaborator’. There is evidence of working collaboratively with class teachers and newly qualified class teachers, to review and reflect on pupil’s progress, planning interventions, organising in-class support, which is advocated in the guidelines of the revised model of provision (DES 2017b). There is little evidence in the findings of Walsh’s study of the SENCO as ‘Rescuer’ or the SENCO as ‘Expert’, and there is a shift in the focus from just teaching pupils within the SEN setting to a more collaborative whole-school approach to SEN provision in primary schools. All Principals and SETs in this study indicated that there is a growth in the use of team teaching which reflects ‘collective inquiry and responsibility, mutual dialogue, joint work and common purpose, with a consequent reduction in small group and individual support’ (Walsh 2020, p.111). This data provides evidence that practices in schools are in line with the Circular 0013/2017 (DES 2017a), which outlines that team

teaching should be included in the range of teaching supports provided in the SEN allocation in primary school.

It is interesting that this is in contrast to findings in Fitzgerald's (2015) small-scale study, on SENCOs' perceptions of their role and how it is enacted in post-primary schools in Ireland, prior to the implementation of the new model of provision. Data were reported from a questionnaire, where 27 participants responded with two being Principals and 13 who held a post of responsibility along with other responsibilities (with only 3 at senior management). The study found that models of support in schools were predominantly based on withdrawal for specialist teaching. The deficit view of disability is preserved in that specific needs are identified within the learner and that this requires highly specialised learning programmes. The findings here would suggest that there was a continued need for the 'Expert' in SEN. It was reported that no clear SENCO identity emerged in the findings although it was found that numerous roles were blended together with the majority of SENCOs fulfilling additional roles (most were mainstream teachers or SETs). It was reported that SENCOs that held leadership positions (which was less than half of the participants) identified more strongly with the role of SENCO. These SENCOs were in the minority and were described as 'Collaborators'. It was reported that they were involved in coordinating SEN from a whole-school perspective and used their position to build systems that might promote a whole-school approach to inclusive practice. The findings indicated that most SENCOs that held the post as SEN teachers seemed more concerned with being a SENCO as Rescuer or SENCO as Expert.

Fitzgerald's (2015) study outlined the key elements of the role of post-primary SENCO's, which were categorised into three broad areas:

- Administrative tasks: involving report writing, applications for reasonable accommodations and timetabling;
- Collaborative practice: working with external agencies and Principals, working with parents, consultancy with colleagues; and
- Teaching: working mainly in withdrawal settings with individuals or small groups of pupils, co-teaching in mainstream classrooms or teaching in subject areas.

A reference to the SENCO as ‘Expert’ is evident in the study but this brings tension when running alongside the discourse of inclusive pedagogy that promotes advancing education for all (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011). According to Ainscow and Sandhill (2010), if a more universal response is created in schools, where colleagues collaborate, reflect, problem-solve and work towards a collective goal this would inform actions and change the thinking around their practice. It is then that the SENCO could be the consultant and advise staff on inclusive pedagogies (Arnaiz and Catejon 2001).

Fitzgerald and Radford’s (2020) small-scale study explored the factors influencing leadership for inclusive special education in post-primary schools in Ireland. The qualitative study involved interviews with Principals and SENCOs in six schools. The findings of this study captured the tensions associated with attempts to formalise the role in a system that promotes inclusive education, while also providing special education. It was found that there are significant variances in SENCO roles across schools, the role is complex and challenging, there is a lack of formal SENCO role recognition, and formal leadership status alone does not promote SENCO leadership. It was also reported that SENCOs’ level of expertise and Principal’s leadership is crucial to SENCO role enactment. The study also advocates for the development of SENCOs’ leadership capacity within an integrated system which promotes a collective approach to inclusive and special education (Fitzgerald 2020). The findings from this study and the wider empirical base are theorised using Hornby’s model of inclusive special education (2015) and highlight that SENCOs support learning across the continuum of need using their expertise. The findings suggested that SENCO leadership was synonymous with specialist knowledge and that Kearns (2005) typology of the ‘Expert’ working alone could be extended to include use of their expertise to support and coach colleagues on inclusive pedagogical and curricular support, which also aligns with Hallet’s view of pedagogical leaders (Hallet 2022). It was suggested that the ‘Expert’ role and the ‘Collaborator’ role be combined to facilitate SENCOs in specialist teaching and advisory roles. The specialist knowledge can influence colleagues’ attitudes and pedagogical approaches (Fitzgerald and Radford 2020).

Walsh’s study (2020) also identified the contribution that SETs make to leading and managing change, with a specific focus on SEN policy development and

strategic planning. It found that the structures, the systems for reviewing and updating policy, which facilitate the contribution and the involvement of the board of management and staff, vary depending on school size. In line with the *Learning Support Guidelines* (DES 2000) and the *Guidelines for Primary Schools* (DES 2017b), all schools in the study have whole-school SEN policies, outlining areas such as testing, SEN team allocation, resource management and processes but do not always follow a whole-school collaborative approach to planning in relation to policies. In the bigger schools the SEN coordinator and SEN teams initiated reviews, amended policies and then shared proposed amendments with the entire staff for further discussion before being ratified by the board. In contrast, in the smaller school's whole staff collaboration and decision-making was evident with parent representatives included in the consultative process. However, in two teacher schools, that have shared SETs, it was found that Principals assume responsibility for updating the SEN policy. There is evidence that the person managing SEN provision can be viewed as the 'SENCO as Collaborator' as there is collaboration between school staff and parents with regard to policy development in the area of SEN.

The responsibilities, tasks, and duties of those coordinating SEN provision were also identified in Walsh's (2020) study, both formally as part of the in-school management team and informally as part of the SEN structure. The responsibilities and tasks assigned to SETs that provide leadership in the area of SEN provision in schools and that support Principals to lead the school in order of reference are: liaising with government agencies and other external agencies (NEPS, Speech and Language therapists and SENOs); purchasing and managing resources for SEN; timetabling; record keeping; mentoring and induction of newly qualified teachers and new appointees to the SEN team; and the pastoral care of pupils. It was found that the roles and responsibilities undertaken by SETs in primary schools carry a heavy administrative workload. The findings demonstrate that tasks related to the areas of assessment, planning, communication and policy allow SETs to effectively execute their role but these areas have increased the operational and administrative workloads of SETs. The extensive workload of the SENCO is echoed in the international literature and thus in international settings (Abbott 2007; Takala *et al.* 2009; Hallett and Hallett 2017; Curran *et al.* 2018; Curran and Boddison 2021). Walsh (2020) reports that these responsibilities, along with teaching duties, restrict opportunities for

undertaking the leadership aspects of the SEN coordinator's role. Again this reality is reflected in the international domain and referred in relevant international research, as previously discussed (Agaliotis and Kalyva 2011; Goransson *et al.* 2015; Soan 2017; Curran and Boddison 2021). While there has been some flexibility in the allocation of time for planning and review, SETs and particularly those in smaller schools and shared schools find difficulty in completing all the tasks efficiently. The duties of collaboratively setting up timetables, drawing up pupil profiles, compiling IEPs, typing up notes and minutes of meetings are all part of the planning in SEN. They also meet with other professionals, parents and provide guidance to SNA's to assist pupils. It is reported that SETs review the school SEN policy and lead the processes of keeping practices and procedures up to date. All of these duties are outlined in the Learning Support Guidelines (DES 2000) and it was found that finding sufficient time for completing all the tasks is a challenge. This trend in the research regarding SENCOs having insufficient time to undertake their role is reflected as well in the international literature (Abbott 2007; Takala *et al.* 2009; Rosen-Webb 2011; Curran *et al.* 2018; Curran and Boddison 2021). The evolving nature of approaches in schools means that SENCOs, in addition to teaching, are now charged with building digital systems to analyse, manage and disperse pupil data, manage teams and resources, identify new learning needs of staff, provide professional learning, mentor and coach staff on new practices, and engage with multi-disciplinary collaboration inside and outside of the school (Curran and Boddison 2021; Fitzgerald and Radford 2017; 2020; Walsh 2023).

Fitzgerald's (2015) study explored the strategic duties of the SENCO role in post-primary schools. The results indicated that where SENCOs undertook tasks to drive and lead the SEN agenda at whole-school level, the tasks that were of most importance to them were whole-school leadership of SEN, whole-school management of SEN, liaising with the Principal, and collaborating with colleagues. However, the least important aspects of the role were the provision of staff development and implementation of the school plan in SEN. It was found that SENCOs in post-primary schools also fulfil roles that are hugely operational and their capacity to effect change to inclusive practice from a whole-school perspective is limited due to a lack of status. From the international perspective, Curran and Boddison (2021) indicated that traditionally the SENCO role has been viewed as having a low status in England.

Fitzgerald (2015) insisted that by promoting the role to the management team would elevate the status attributed to the role and therefore facilitate greater strategic planning for inclusion, which corroborates findings from other studies (O’Gorman and Drudy 2011; Oldham and Radford 2011, Walsh 2020).

Specific research on the SENCO role in Irish primary school setting is limited in Ireland. Recently Colum and Mac Ruairc (2023) conducted a small-scale study where they interviewed four SENCOs to gain insight into the operational and leadership role of the SENCO. While this is a small-scale study and the results cannot be generalised it does highlight some trends with regard to the enactment of the SENCO role in Ireland given the current policy developments. The findings indicated that there were five broad areas of SENCO responsibilities as follows (Colum and MacRuairic 2023, p.543):

1. Identifying children with additional needs and administrating assessments;
2. Fostering in-school collaboration and supporting others;
3. Determining and monitoring resource allocation;
4. Providing staff development; and
5. Liaising with external agencies.

The value of the SENCO as leader was reinforced from the findings of this study. The SENCOs in this study also reported extensive workloads and a lack of recognition of the administrative and coordination duties associated with the role. The authors noted that monetary and titled incentives need to be considered at national policy level for the SENCO role. The need for more extensive research into the role of the SENCO in primary schools was highlighted as imperative to extend the insights gained from the narratives derived from this study.

In summary, the findings from the Irish context regarding the SENCO role echo the realities of the role as evident from the review of the international literature. Research on the SENCO role in the primary school setting is limited and there is a need for more in-depth research. In particular, there has been no large-scale study of SENCOs in Ireland and this is now warranted in order to investigate the duties, practices, profile, status, professional learning needs and challenges of SENCOs and their role in the Irish primary school context. The next section will now consider the

enablers and inhibitors that exist both in Ireland and internationally for SENCO role enactment.

2.10 Enablers to Role Execution: What supports the SENCO role?

Previous research identified factors that facilitate the enactment of the SENCO role (Struyve *et al.* 2018; Whalley 2018). These factors include school leaders (Principals), a distribution of leadership that promotes collaboration and a team approach, SENCOs being part of the senior management structure, SENCO expertise and qualifications, and professional learning (Cole 2005; Szwed 2007; Fitzgerald and Radford 2017; Struyve *et al.* 2018; Whalley 2018; Lin *et al.* 2022; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023).

2.10.1 Principals' ability to create inclusive cultures and support for the SENCO role

The Principal is central to facilitating the creation of a school culture that is inclusive, collaborative, flexible and supportive (Kugelmass and Ainscow 2004). Under SETAM and with moves towards whole-school approaches to inclusive education, the SENCO is often expected to inform strategic decisions and influence school culture and attitudes. For the SENCO to be successful in these tasks, Principals need to have a strong commitment to building and strengthening an inclusive school. In developing an inclusive culture research on leadership highlights the importance of distributed leadership and participative decision making and the necessity of 'a shared commitment by staff to processes that produce an overall enhancement in participation among all the participants' (Kugelmass and Ainscow 2004).

As we have moved to a more social model, where the emphasis is on supporting a child's assessed needs (Logan 2017) and with the introduction of the revised model, more flexibility and autonomy has been provided to schools. As schools are expected to adopt a collaborative 'whole-school approach to planning' (DES 2017b, p.22) the additional autonomy has increased responsibility. The role of the Principal is critical for effective collaboration to occur as they must 'encourage, engage and empower teachers in the collaborative quest' (Hargreaves 2019, p.16). SENCOs will be able to execute their role effectively if a culture of collaboration is

instilled in schools as collaborative professionalism helps to develop relationships of trust, support, solidarity, while it also facilitates professional dialogue, thoughtful feedback and collective responsibility (Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018).

Fitzgerald's (2015) findings indicated that the Principal is important in promoting inclusive practices and the role of the SENCO and highlighted the importance of Principals' role of leading organisational structures that facilitate the cultivation of inclusive structures, which then in turn cultivate inclusive practice. This study highlighted the importance of the SENCO being able to 'grow and flourish' with their colleagues when the Principal is committed to nurturing growth and development of new practices and an openness to new learning. Principal leadership as an enabler to the SENCO role has been identified across the international literature (e.g. Riehl 2000; Cole 2005; Leithwood and Riehl 2005; Ainscow and Sandhill 2010; Lin *et al.* 2022). Griffin *et al.* (2008) reported that receiving support from school Principals and teacher colleagues are imperative for SENCO role enactment.

2.10.2 School context

The SENCO role varies across schools. The review of the international literature illustrated how school context impacts on the enactment of the SENCO role (e.g. Cole 2005; Norwich 2010; Goransson *et al.* 2015; Klang *et al.* 2016; Curran and Boddison 2021). Walsh's (2020) study reported that the school context is a fundamental factor in the coordination and leading of SEN in schools. It was indicated that the larger schools that are led by administrative Principals tend to provide more opportunities to have an active role in organising and managing the provision of SEN compared to smaller schools. In smaller schools where SETs are shared between schools to make up a full-time position, the Principals and Deputy Principals organise SEN provision.

2.10.3 Distributed co-leadership: SENCO as part of the management team

As previously mentioned, provision for pupils with SEN is guided by legislation and policy towards a more universal approach (DES 2007), yet research indicates that the role of the SENCO should be assigned to the senior management team in the school with a view to leading the SEN agenda in schools and elevating its status (Layton

2005; O’Gorman and Drudy 2011; Oldham and Radford 2011; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020). It is evident in the literature that there is a consistent argument that if SENCOs are to influence whole-school policy and practice in special education at all school levels, it is within the school management structure that they need to be strategically placed (Cole 2005; Wedell 2006; O’Gorman and Drudy 2011; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020). There are tensions too in the literature regarding SENCO leadership as some studies have found that not all SENCOs desire a formal leadership role (Curran 2019; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020). In Curran’s phenomenological study of the SENCO role in terms of the reforms taking place in England in special education, it was found that SENCOs did want to lead but did not want the formal leadership post. Instead, they wished to act as ‘covert entrepreneurs’ using their extensive knowledge in the area (Curran 2019, p.85). Fitzgerald and Radford’s study (2020) found that SENCOs reported that a formal leadership post elevated the status of the post which in turn supported the role. The authors also reported that the formal post created a barrier to developing team approaches to coordinating provision as it created difficulties in distributing tasks to others on the SEN team.

Walsh’s (2020) study found participants without posts of responsibility or formal qualifications in SEN did not engage to the same level in leading the school’s SEN provision and did not have the same impact on the planning of SEN provision. Interestingly, Fitzgerald and Radford’s study (2020) also found that where SENCOs held management posts, and in particular senior management posts, they reported greater effectiveness in their roles but this demands competence in leadership for successful enactment of the role. Walsh also found in her study that when those coordinating SEN have a formal post that they too are more engaged and have a greater impact in planning SEN provision.

Walsh (2020) recommended that a SEN coordinator should be appointed to every school and that they have access to specific professional development in the leadership of SEN, have designated time for undertaking duties and have a formal role in the school management team to enhance the autonomy of the role. The appointment of shared coordinators between smaller schools is called for to enable Principals to embrace shared leadership with the coordinator to manage SEN in their school and give access to expertise, knowledge and skills from a leader that is focused on the teachers’ and pupils’ needs. Recommendations outlined by Walsh (2020) are echoed

in the international literature as previously discussed (e.g. Agaliotis and Kalyva 2011; Van Leeuwem *et al.* 2013; Curran and Boddison 2021; Lin *et al.* 2022).

2.10.4 Shared leadership, collaboration and a team approach

Walsh (2020) reported that through embracing shared leadership that Principals and SENCOs can facilitate school SEN teams to work collaboratively in the planning, implementing and reviewing of SEN provision in schools. An enabler of the SENCO role is having a suitably skilled core SEN team that has designated time for duties that are distributed across the team (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017; Martin 2019). Systematic collaboration is imperative to enable the sharing of knowledge and learning within and across schools as it permits all staff to lead learning for all pupils especially pupils with additional needs (Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021). Research has identified that the development of systems promoting collaborative practices, such as the use of technology and SEN being a standing item on meeting agendas, facilitates SENCO role enactment (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017, 2020). This collaborative and communicative system approach allows SENCOs to act as ‘figureheads’ (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017, p.454) without being bogged down with the administration and co-ordination of SEN for the whole-school community (Oldham and Radford 2011; Hallett and Hallett 2017). If systems are not embedded in whole-school practice it is unsustainable for SENCOs to be solely responsible for the learning of pupils with additional needs (Fitzgerald and Radford 2020). To ensure that collaboration occurs within schools it is imperative that structures and systems are implemented at a whole-school level (O’Neill and Logan 2012). These structures are needed to ensure that collaboration becomes an interactive process in supporting teachers identifying and monitoring the needs of pupils with SEN and implementing strategies that target these needs (O’Neill and Logan 2012). SENCOs with a post of responsibility are better placed to impact on the development of these whole-school systems that promote inclusive practices (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). Finally, it is crucial that specialist knowledge, skills and competencies are aligned to patterns of distribution in schools as this can ensure that SENCOs are the pedagogical leads in schools who champion innovation and inclusive pedagogy across the school (Fitzgerald 2022).

2.10.5 Expertise/ Qualification

SENCO expertise has been reported in the research as a SENCO role facilitator (Bush 2008; Fitzgerald and Radford 2017; Struyve *et al.* 2018; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020). Bush (2008) noted that to develop SENCO leadership status an authority of expertise was deemed important. Struyve *et al.* (2018) highlighted that possessing expertise is associated with the SENCO positions as a teacher leader and they received the legitimacy to act as teacher leaders when this expertise is recognised. In Fitzgerald and Radford's studies (2017; 2020) SENCO expertise in special education pedagogy was identified as both a facilitator and a barrier to SENCOs capacity to fulfil the role. Developing SENCO expertise in special education seemed essential to empower SENCOs in their leadership capacity but yet it also was shown to increase the burden of responsibility and sense of isolation to informed decision-making. It is necessary and timely for SENCOs to move away from viewing SENCOs as just experts responsible for educating pupils with diverse needs and move towards placing SENCOs as pedagogical leads (Hallett 2022), collaborators and co-leaders within an integrated system, providing a graduated response to a continuum of need. In Fitzgerald (2015), it is recommended that SENCOs receive CPD that is specifically tailored to their needs as 'systems leaders' and not just as experts in special education.

2.10.6 Professional learning and support

Professional learning, which includes qualifications and collaborative approaches to professional learning (communities of practice and networks), has been reported as a facilitator within the literature (Ainscow and Sandhill 2010; Rosen-Webb 2011; Netolicky 2016; Whalley 2018). The one-year National Award for Special Educational Needs Co-ordination (NASENCo) in England 'recognises the significance of the SENCO role in maintaining quality education for all in schools' (Rosen-Webb 2011, p.166) and can enhance the status of SENCOs in schools and SLT membership (Whalley 2018). To be effective, professional learning for the SENCO needs to not only focus on developing knowledge and the 'SENCO as Expert' (Kearns 2005) but should be tailored to the SENCOs needs as strategic 'system leaders' (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017, p.463). SENCO affinity groups (SENCO community of practices – collaborative professional learning) have also been proposed as a means

of supporting and facilitating SENCOs and enabling them to share practice and experiences across schools (Lin *et al.* 2022). In Ireland in recent years, there has been a growing number of regional and online communities of practice/ professional learning networks for SETs and SENCOs. In this space SENCOs collectively move into positions that foster connectedness, shared identity, networked leadership and positivity towards a more fluid, flexible and unique space and away from positions of isolation and uncertainty (Fitzgerald 2022). Many of these groups have been established by SENCOs and SETs themselves or in collaboration with third-level institutions, such as the Mary Immaculate College SENCO Forum. The Forum provides professional support and professional learning for sustainable change for SENCOs from SENCO, as well as collegiality and guidance for its members (Fitzgerald 2022). Other groups have been established in partnership with the Education Centre Network and the NEPS and School Management Bodies have facilitated communities of practice in various regions. Fitzgerald (2022) indicated that the benefits of SENCOs participating and leading the establishment of SENCO communities of practice include ‘collegiality, empowerment and sustainable professional learning’. (Fitzgerald 2022, p.7). Recent studies have identified that the lack of access to professional support and guidance threatens the sustainability of the SENCO role (Fitzgerald and Radford 2020; Curran and Boddison 2021; O’Hara 2021). In O’Hara’s small-scale mixed-methods study, which explored the impact of a post-primary SENCO community of practice, she found that SENCOs felt less isolated and less anxious and felt more connected, with a sense of belonging and identity due to being involved in the group.

2.11 Barriers of the Development of the Role

Extensive research internationally has identified numerous challenges and barriers to SENCO role enactment (Whalley 2018; Smith and Broomhead 2019). These barriers include a lack of time, extensive workload, lack of formal role recognition, as well as inadequate and limited external agency support (Abbott 2007; O’Gorman and Drudy 2011; Whalley 2018; Smith and Broomhead 2019; Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020).

2.11.1 No formal recognition or job specifications of the role

A lack of formal recognition of the SENCO role acts as a barrier for SENCOs. The literature has identified the need to formalise the role and that this role should be positioned within the senior management team (Layton 2005; O’Gorman and Drudy 2011; Oldham and Radford 2011; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020; Lin *et al.* 2022). As no formal designation of the SENCO role exists in Ireland, there are many various interpretations of the role (O’Gorman and Drudy 2011). The literature has identified the need to formalise the role and that this role should be positioned on the senior management team of the school in order to elevate the status of the role and to lead a whole-school SEN agenda in schools (Layton 2005; O’Gorman and Drudy 2011; Oldham and Radford 2011; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020). The policy guidelines in Ireland are without any recommendation to align the role to the management structures within a school (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). In the policy guidelines, it is recommended that a coordinating teacher should undertake a post-graduate diploma in Special Educational Needs but this is not obligatory (DES 2007; 2017). The recommendation has been reported that all schools should have a special needs advisor role on the management team to coordinate SEN provision in schools and that the training for teachers working in special education should include leadership, collaboration and teamwork skills (O’Gorman and Drudy 2011). As these recommendations are not being addressed in government policy, it could be a reason why SENCOs are being called to create their own role and occupy a space that is not familiar to them, with reports that the SENCOs feel a lack of belonging to any school team (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017).

2.11.2 Time and workload

A lack of time has been identified in literature as a major barrier to performing the SENCO role (Takala *et al.* 2009; Whalley 2018; Smith and Broomhead 2019; Curran and Boddison 2021). Aligned to this is the extensive workload that the SENCOs endure in the enactment of the role, which is another significant barrier to the SENCO role (Takala *et al.* 2009; Fitzgerald and Radford 2017, 2020; Curran and Boddison 2021; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023). The administrative and bureaucratic workloads

have increased due to the need to evidence the ‘value-added’ aspect of additional resource allocations for transparency and accountability (Fitzgerald and Radford 2020; Doyle 2021; Walsh 2021; Hallett 2022). Hallett (2022) argues that the role must not be defined by the aspects of procedures and paperwork, although it is an important part of the role, as in doing so would accept that meeting the needs of all learners, including those with SEND is really a ‘paper exercise’ (Hallett 2022, p. 2). The increasing amount of administrative tasks that are now associated with the planning and acquiring of resources, (which include individual education planning, assessment, standardised testing, reasonable accommodations, timetabling, applying for and completing applications for SNAs and developing school policy (Rosen Webb 2011; Curran and Boddison 2021; Doyle 2021; Walsh 2021) leave limited time for the SENCO to plan collaboratively, be proactive in their actions and reflections or be theoretically underpinned with informed data (Fitzgerald 2022). Finally, Whalley (2018) in a case study approach that examined the tale of three SENCOs post the 2015 reforms in England commented that lack of time to do the role sufficiently continues to be a barrier. Overall, the extensive paperwork and administrative tasks potentially leave limited time for the SENCO to work collaboratively and plan the strategic approach for school-wide inclusive practices.

2.11.3 Lack of collaboration with external professional services and agencies

One of the most important duties of the SENCO is liaising with external professional services and agencies (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023). Engagement with external agencies is essential to ensure the availability of therapeutic intervention, which substantially impacts on the extent to which the Continuum of Support can facilitate inclusive special education (Holland and Fitzgerald 2023). Drudy and Kinsella (2009, p.655) commented that ‘adequate, timely, and coordinated support services from health and other professionals’ are required for an inclusive education system. Hornby’s (2015) inclusive special education model encourages and recommends engagement and collaboration with external bodies and agencies, such as NEPS psychologists, SENOs, the NCSE Support Service (Teacher Advisory Service), the Inspectorate, HSE and allied health professionals. In addition, the DES (2017b) guidelines for supporting pupils with SEN in primary schools indicated that

it is vital that schools have established procedures for collaborating and communicating with the various external bodies to enhance the quality of the provision provided to pupils with SEN. There is also engagement with these external agencies, specifically the HSE, for the purpose of an Assessment of Need (AON). The AON is a process provided under the Disability Act (2005) and under the remit of the HSE, which ‘identifies the health and education needs of children and young people’ (NCSE 2023b). Subsequently, it is evident that engagement with external agencies is imperative for the furtherance of inclusive education in schools. Research has reported that within schools there is inadequate support and collaboration with external agencies and thus this is a barrier to the SENCO enacting their role, establishing school-wide collaborative inclusive practices and providing effective support for pupils (Abbott 2007; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023; Holland and Fitzgerald 2023; Walsh 2023).

Abbott (2007) noted that there was a disappointing level of collaboration between SENCOs and outside agencies, which was negatively impacting on efforts to achieve the most effective teaching and learning within schools. A lack of clear collaboration policies are identified as a potential reason to why there is inadequate collaboration with external agencies (Walsh 2020; Holland 2022). Walsh (2020) indicated that there is a need for stronger policies to facilitate a more collaborative and coordinated approach to SEN provision in mainstream primary schools in Ireland. Holland (2022) commented that policy and legislation are complex and ever-changing, which in turn adds a level of complexity to the everyday interactions between SENCOs, SLT and NEPS. Colum and Mac Ruairc (2023, p.550) highlighted that SENCOs are collaborating and liaising with external agencies but that there are variations in practice arising from a function and specific leadership roles that is ‘poorly conceptualised at policy level with the result that the outcome at school level can be problematic’. Furthermore, insufficient understanding from stakeholders of others’ roles can be a barrier to collaboration (Holland and Fitzgerald 2023). Boesley and Crane (2018) indicated that SENCOs engaging in the individual support planning process for pupils reported that external professionals did not understand their role in this collaborative multi-disciplinary and multi-agency process. All of these factors can potentially contribute to the lack of support and inadequate collaboration with external

agencies, which in turn acts as a barrier to the SENCO's role of developing the inclusive agenda in their school setting.

2.12 Theme Two Conclusion

Challenges exist for the SENCO role in light of legislation and policy guidance gravitating to a more universal approach to the provision for pupils with SEN. Universal approaches to inclusive education in our schools, wherein all teachers are responsible for all pupils, and where special education is the responsibility of everybody, have left some questioning if there is need for a SENCO (Oldham and Radford 2011). Others are questioning if it is now timely to reposition the SENCO role and attend to developing leadership, collaborative and relational skills of SENCOs in order to move away from expert models of SEN (Fitzgerald and Radford 2020).

To date the lack of formal recognition of the role has led to variability in practice and inhibits development of role identity (Fitzgerald and Radford 2020). The introduction of the revised model of SEN provision has bestowed additional autonomy and responsibility to Principals and SEN teams, which has led to some variability in practice (Tiernan and Casserly 2018; Curtin and Egan 2021). In Ireland, as no formal clarity or recognition of the role exists, it continues to evolve whilst other considerable changes are occurring to educational policies as mentioned above. Changes in policy impacts practice and leads to many alterations in the way schools are managing, coordinating and teaching in the area of special education (Kenny *et al.* 2020). In Ireland there are calls to build integrated special education systems and to develop the SENCO as a specialist teacher, collaborator, and leader within such systems but this requires formally conceptualising the role (Fitzgerald 2021). Martin (2019) in a study of post-primary SENCOs, recommended that the SENCO could be modelled on the existing Home School Liaison Officer with a specification that could be adapted depending on each school's context. The Home School Liaison Officer is a teacher from the pupil's school who provides support through home visits, parent classes and parent courses, transition programmes and offers information on family supports that are available in the locality.

The SENCO should be appointed to the management team (Layton 2005; O’Gorman and Drudy 2011; Oldham and Radford 2011; Martin 2019; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020; O’Hara 2021; Walsh 2023), and given the access to specific professional development in the leadership of SEN with designated time for undertaking duties (O’Gorman and Drudy 2011; Oldham and Radford 2011; Curran *et al.* 2018; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020; Walsh 2023). Communities of practice within schools and across schools are recommended to facilitate reflection on practice and collaborative problem-solving (Walsh 2023). SENCOs are leading the way in establishing the networks for these communities of practice and working from the ground up (Hallett 2022) in managing and leading SEN provision in schools.

Theme Three: Leadership and the SENCO Role

2.13 Theme Three Introduction

This section examines leadership for inclusive special education and how SENCOs lead in response to educational reforms whilst embroiled in policy and political agendas, organisational structures and cultures as they advocate for inclusive practices within schools. SENCOs lead as they navigate the tensions between political discourses and educational policies related to raising academic standards and the promotion of inclusive education (Clarke and Done 2021). SENCOs operate in a ‘quasi-marketised education system where academic performance data matters’ (Done *et al.* 2023, p.199). In Ireland the revised SET allocation criteria awards 68.5% of the school’s additional allocation to standardised assessment, which has increased from 27.85% from the first iteration of SETAM in 2017 (DES 2017a; DE2024). This creates a tension with marketisation agendas when set against a resource allocation model, which awards greater resourcing for poor results. These neo-liberal educational approaches require the redesign of the professional identities of those leading education within schools (Anderson and Cohen 2015) and the reconceptualisation of SENCO leadership to incorporate advocacy for pupils with additional needs. Advocacy leadership together with models such as transformational, shared, collaborative, distributed or participatory leadership will be examined in this section and the extent to which they relate to SENCO leadership.

SENCOs are tasked with leading SEN provision in schools (Tissot 2013). They may or may not hold a formal position of leadership, such as a post of responsibility, and /or be a member of the senior leadership team in the school (Pearson *et al.* 2015). It is evident from the literature that SENCOs are increasingly leading the inclusive education approach in schools and the school-wide strategic development of policy and practice for inclusive and special education (Dobson and Douglas 2020; Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021). In order to develop and sustain an inclusive school culture, research argues that SENCOs should possess a situational and organisational leadership position (Done *et al.* 2017; Esposito and Carroll 2019). Inclusive education and optimising learning for all students is dependent on a shared vision, collaborative approaches and collective efforts within the school community (Harris and Jones 2020; Leithwood *et al.* 2020). SENCO leadership is critical to facilitating these

collaborative and collective approaches and a school-wide response to inclusive and special education (Done *et al.* 2017; Dobson and Douglas 2020; Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021) and to minimise the marginalisation and social exclusion of students with SEN (Done *et al.* 2023).

The importance of leadership and its connection with school effectiveness is evident throughout the literature (Harris and Jones 2020), as is the strong relationship between leadership and organisational innovation (Harris and Jones 2020; Hargreaves *et al.* 2014). Leadership is a central contributor to change and improvement within schools (Leithwood 2008, 2020) and that change process can be complex (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012). Leadership is central to the promotion of school-wide approaches to inclusive special education (Travers *et al.* 2010; Rose *et al.* 2015; Banks *et al.* 2016; Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021). Leithwood *et al.* (2020, p.4) specifically highlight the importance of school leadership and the influence that it has on teaching and learning as follows:

School leadership has a significant effect on features of the school organization, which positively influences the quality of teaching and learning. While moderate in size, this leadership effect is vital to the success of all school improvement efforts.

(Leithwood *et al.* 2020, p.4)

A crucial determinant to organisational effectiveness is leadership (Hargreaves *et al.* 2014; Louis and Murphy 2017) and leaders who can develop and maintain improvement at organisational level focus on the development of collective capacity, professional capital and inherent capability of school staff (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012; Leithwood *et al.* 2020). There is also a need for SENCO leaders to challenge neo-liberal political discourses in pursuit of inclusive education for all within school microsystems. The next section will examine traditional models of school leaderships and related concepts, such as distributed leadership, as they relate to leadership for inclusive special education in the school setting.

2.14 Traditional Types of School Leadership

Models of leadership include ‘direction-setting leadership practices’, which involve the establishment and development of a vision and shared goals (Sun and Leithwood

2015). This model was originally grounded in transformational leadership theory (Podsakoff *et al.* 1990) and the concept of transformational leadership initially arose in non-educational settings (e.g. Bass 1985). Leithwood and his colleagues further developed transformational leadership theory for use in educational contexts (Sun and Leithwood 2015). Sun and Leithwood (2015) provided a description of transformational school leadership and the associated intentions of this approach, as follows:

Transformational school leadership (TSL) emphasizes leaders' developing a compelling vision, providing individualized support and intellectual stimulation to staff and engaging them in the achievement of shared goals. These leadership behaviours are intended to appeal to organizational members' basic values, build the organizations' capacities to realize those values, and enact practices aimed at achieving shared goals consistent with these values.

(Sun and Leithwood 2015, p.500)

This description was also reflected by Bass and Reggio in 2006 who explained that transformational leaders:

...are those who stimulate and inspire followers to both achieve extraordinary outcomes, and in the process, develop their own leadership capacity. Transformational leaders help followers grow and develop into leaders by responding to individual followers' needs by empowering them and by aligning the objectives and goals of the individual followers, the leader, the group, and the larger organization.

(Bass and Reggio 2006, p.3)

This model of leadership is centred on school-wide collaborative approaches to decision-making and the implementation of vision and policy in the pursuit of achieving the shared goals of the school. In order to achieve sustainable growth and change, transformational leadership provides a best-fit approach (Bass and Reggio 2006) in leading inclusive special education in schools but in the current climate, such as in the UK which focuses on standards and academisation, advocacy leadership would also be necessary (Clarke and Done 2021). There is a consistent argument in the literature relating to the SENCO, that in order to influence school-wide practices and policies SENCOs need to have a position on the school leadership team or have a place within the management structures (Layton 2005; Travers 2010; O Gorman and Drudy. 2011; Ware *et al.* 2011; Tissot 2013, Fitzgerald 2015). Positional leadership involves membership of a schools' senior leadership team (Pearson *et al.* 2015) and

the requirements of positional leadership within an organisation such as a school, can be viewed as ‘a higher order set of abilities such as goal-setting, visioning, and motivating’ (Dimmock 2002, p.33). A SENCOs position on the senior leadership team can be viewed as a commitment by the school to inclusive values, practices and an inclusive school culture (Coleman 2020). SENCOs however have reported feelings of fear that such a position would inhibit them from evaluating the impact of day-to-day inclusive practice (Curran 2019; Smith and Broomhead 2019). In addition, Hallett and Hallett (2010a) insist that SENCO membership of the management team does not give a right of passage for influencing the capacity within their role to lead change within schools. The level to which SENCOs can make a difference by being part of the SLT is dependent upon ‘the philosophy and courage of the SENCO alongside the cultural expectations of the educational settings’ (Hallett 2022, p.9). Essentially this refers to the ability of the SENCO to advocate for the promotion of inclusive values and practice across the school.

Potentially various factors within the school can impact the SENCO’s ability to influence change. This includes the SENCOs ‘change competence’, according to Tangen (2005, p.68) who noted that teachers (SENCOs) should ‘be competent to serve as change agents and to participate in and lead development work as a regular part of their role’. It is emphasised in the literature that not only can leaders in schools influence others due to having power by virtue of their management position (Morrisey 2021) but those in other positions can also exercise influence depending on their school context (Sachs 2003; King and Stevenson 2017).

In order for change or reform to occur within an organisation, there must be an ability to use the ‘right drivers’, which are described in the literature as, strategy or policy levers that have the best chance of driving change (Fullan 2011, p.3). The right drivers that work effectively on directly changing the culture of school systems (values, skills, norms, relationships and practices) are capacity building, group work, instruction and systematic solutions. It is when these strategies dominate over other drivers such as accountability (test results, appraisal, individual rewards for teachers v capacity building), promoting individuals v groups (leadership quality), technology v instruction and fragmented strategies v integrated or systemic strategies that deep change can occur (Fullan 2011). Fullan (2011) insists that knowing the four right drivers will lead to successful whole system reform and he highlighted:

The glue that binds the effective drivers together is the underlying attitude, philosophy, and theory of action. The mind-set that works for whole system reform is the one that inevitably generates individual and collective motivation and corresponding skills to transform the system.

(Fullan 2011, p.5).

The strategies that leverage a group instead of individuals working alone will lead to successful change (Fullan 2011). A well-known concept in the literature is that of social capital, which is when a pattern of interaction among and between teachers and other staff, when focused on pupil learning, makes a measurable difference on pupil achievement and sustained progress (Fullan 2011). This concept of social capital is in contrast to individual capital, which refers to a teacher's cumulative abilities, knowledge and skills (developed through formal education and on the job experience). Fullan (2011) asserts that social capital exists in the relationships among and between teachers and Principals and it is recommended to develop both high human (individual) and social capital, but social capital is more powerful in an organisation. Social capital can impact human (individual) capital, meaning teachers can potentially become better teachers by virtue of the fact that they are staff members of a particular school (Fullan 2011). There are many benefits of developing social-capital based strategies for schools. For example, when collaborative practices are focussed, knowledge in the system is transferred and customised, thus allowing teachers to learn from each other as they know what each other are doing. In addition to instructional capacity, collaboration with a purpose serves as the most effective form of lateral accountability. When these strategies are in place together with transparency of results it fosters collective ownership and accountability, which brings about a route to developing a trusted and respected profession. Within this approach, collaborative cultures within and across schools would be required as well as key personnel (all teachers) owning the changes and engaging in continuous instructional improvement, who are surrounded by a culture invested in developing social capital (Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Fullan 2011). Whilst considering the factors that build collaborative cultures and trusting relationships, school culture and the systems, which promote the development of trust and relationships, are important. When a teacher (SENCO) has expertise in a specific area and has developed trust, respect and good relationships with other teachers, they can command influence in that area of expertise (Morrissey 2021). If this influence is based on their vision and values and if they have the

capability in bringing others along the journey of change, then leadership is being exercised (Criswell *et al.* 2018) and they are producing social capital (Fullan 2011).

Morrissey (2021), in a conceptual examination of leadership for inclusion noted that distributed leadership is essential to enable meaningful inclusion in schools. Distributed leadership is a model of leadership that focuses on the interactions between formal and informal leaders with an emphasis on leadership practice instead of the delegation of actions (Harris and Spillane 2008). Distributed leadership is an ‘indispensable component of inclusive education’ systems (Miskolci *et al.* 2016, p.53). Leithwood *et al.* (2020, p.16) claim that ‘School leadership can have an especially positive influence on school and student outcome when it is distributed’. Distributed leadership provides teachers (as leaders) with agency and autonomy to support and advocate for pupils with additional needs (Morrissey 2021). Within the Irish context, the Irish policy frameworks, such as *School Self-Evaluation* and *Looking at Our Schools Quality Framework for Primary and Post Primary Schools* (DES Inspectorate 2016a; 2016b; DE Inspectorate 2022a; 2022b), endorse the importance of whole-school collaborative and distributed approaches to the leadership of learning. In the Department of Education and Skills (2018) circular on the ‘Leadership and Management of Primary Schools’, it is evident that the Department envisage that distributed leadership is the preferred leadership approach within the Irish context. Spillane (2006, p.3) argues that leadership practice from a distributed perspective is ‘a product of the joint interaction of school *leaders*, *followers*, and aspects of their *situations* such as tools and routines’. The interplay between leaders and followers is evident and add an important emphasis on the role of followers in shaping leadership practice (Swaffield and MacBeath 2009). Leaders and followers are interdependent of each other with the follower’s (teacher) influencing the leader from the ground up. Leadership practice results from the interactions among leaders and followers and is not a product of a leader’s knowledge and skill (Spillane 2006). The situation also influences leadership practice, and tools (e.g. lesson plans) and routines (e.g. professional development meetings) act to fundamentally shape leadership practice as opposed to being accessories of such practice (Swaffield and MacBeath 2009).

Distributed leadership has, however, brought some debate (Harris and Jones 2020). The report published by the OECD entitled *Improving School Leadership: Policy and Practice* (Pont *et al.* 2008) adopts the definition of distributed leadership

as it applies to formal posts of responsibility allocated in schools, which is positional leadership. Within the literature it is argued however, that distributed leadership is not only enacted or in the control of those with formal roles or responsibilities, but is also in the domain of other informal leaders in the school (Diamond and Spillane 2016) and relies on the school-wide collective investment of all teachers for wholesale school improvement (Senge 1990). In relation to those holding formal leadership roles and responsibilities, interdependent interaction and practice are promoted over individual and independent action (Harris and Jones 2020). Distributed leadership facilitates capacity building in schools and other leaders emerge, in addition to the Principal, to take on various responsibilities (Harris and Jones 2020), which could facilitate advocacy leadership to take place. Distributed leadership infers that leadership practice is an organisational influence that is ‘stretched’, extended or shared (Spillane and Orlina 2005; Diamond and Spillane 2016). This form of leadership is identified as one of the leadership models making up a large proportion of contemporary empirical research base (Harris and Jones 2020) relates to positive organisational growth, innovation and positively influencing student outcomes (Ainscow and Sandhill 2010; Hargreaves and Fullan 2012; Leithwood *et al.* 2020; Harris and Jones 2020). Both formal and informal distributed leadership are encouraged when cultures of collaboration and socially responsive approaches to organisational improvement exist.

Distributed leadership approaches to school improvement aligns to the concept of schools as learning organisations (SLO) (Senge 1990; 2014). Learning organisations can be defines as:

Organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.

(Senge 1990, p.3)

Distributed approaches which are shared across a team (DES 2017b; 2018) are promoted by learning organisation theory, which recognises that leadership should not just be held by those in senior formal positions or with senior leadership teams (Senge 1990; Spillane and Diamond 2007; Kools and Stoll 2016). Silins *et al.* (2002) provide a holistic definition of a school learning organisation as follows:

Schools as learning organisations employ processes of environmental scanning; develop shared goals; establish collaborative teaching and learning environments; encourage initiatives and risk taking; regularly review all aspects related to and influencing the work of the school; recognise and reinforce good work; and, provide opportunities for continuing professional development.

(Silins *et al.* 2002, p.26-27)

Kools and Stoll (2016) have noted that this is a holistic definition due to the reference to ‘shared goals’, and the establishment of ‘collaborative teaching and learning environments’ and offers guidance for schools aiming to transform their setting into learning organisations. Learning organisation theory considers the connections between leadership and learning and is closely aligned to interpretations of leadership for learning (Kools and Stoll 2016). Swaffield and MacBeath (2009) have defined this concept ‘leadership for learning’ as follows:

Leadership for learning is a distinct form of educational practice that involves an explicit dialogue, maintaining a focus on learning, attending to the conditions that favour learning, and leadership that is both shared and accountable. Learning and leadership are conceived of as ‘activities’ linked by the centrality of human agency within a framework of moral purpose.

(Swaffield and MacBeath 2009, p.42)

Leadership for learning views learning as a situated, collective, and individual effort, which is complex and it is linked to leadership in a continuous cycle of action, participation and reflection involving collective and collaborative practice (Swaffield and MacBeath, 2009). Leadership for learning is enabled when ‘bridging social capital’ approaches are adopted (Hallett 2022). SENCOs must navigate the unavoidable social networks created in schools and bridging social capital can be adopted when social links are less entrenched (Hallett 2022) and has the advantage of being ‘outward looking, connecting people with others beyond their immediate reference group, opening up new ways of seeing, relating and learning (Swaffield and MacBeath 2009, p.45). This approach fosters leadership for learning where teachers, parents and pupils have a voice that can inform ‘the moral purpose of the school and the extent to which accountability for learning is shared and valued’ (Hallett and Hallett 2017, p.50). Bridging social capital can enable a ‘vision of learning as participation within a distributed model of leadership’ (Hallett 2022, p.9). In addition, Girelli *et al.* (2019) conducted a qualitative survey and focus-group based study with 92 SENCOs in Italy and identified the central role of SENCOs as ‘figures that act as

a frame and as a bridge' within and outside the school in the promotion of inclusive practices at school level. This study also found that 'in the geo-political areas where it was possible to establish and consolidate networks between SENCOs, distributed leadership seems instead to be timidly looming as a widespread influence' (Girelli *et al.* 2019, p.103). In this scenario the SENCOs, while needing approval from school leaders on the implementation of their choices and decisions, have the opportunity to engage with professionals within and outside the school microsystem to problem-pose and problem-solve and thus formulate proposals and operational solutions (Girelli *et al.* 2019).

Central to the effectiveness of distributed leadership and school learning organisations is the facilitation, promotion and development of collaborative practices/ systems and school-wide collaboration. Distributed models of leadership can result in the development of systematic approaches, which thus facilitate staff and learner engagement, collaborative practice and a commitment to professional learning and reflective practice (Leithwood *et al.* 2020; Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021). SENCO agency can be realised and enhanced when schools develop systematic approaches to collaboration (Fitzgerald and Radford 2020). At the centre of professional collaborative practice lies collective efficacy, distributed leadership and professional collaboration (Harris and Jones 2020). It is imperative to build processes of collaboration for both the leadership for inclusive and special education within schools and SENCO leadership (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). The development of collaborative processes relates to how organisational members are connected through trust and cooperation and where practices are infused with teamwork (lateral or vertical), networking and participation (Hargreaves *et al.* 2007), all of which are essential in developing inclusive practices in schools. Kugelmass (2003) has indicated that a school-wide collaborative approach to inclusive special education with the SENCO positioned as the guide and mentor to support colleagues in their work may result in the advocacy and enhancement of inclusive practices and the pedagogical skills of all. This is reflective of the 'SENCO as Expert', the 'SENCO as Collaborator' and 'SENCO as Rescuer' from Kearns' typology (2005) and of the SENCO as 'pedagogical leads' (Hallett 2022, p.2). Developing systems centred on collaboration, positions the SENCO within the distributed leadership structures of the learning organisation (Oldham and Radford 2011).

The development of social learning processes and collaborative meetings to share, problem-solve, and reflect on collective goals, can result in moving towards the creation of inclusive cultures (Ainscow and Sandhill 2010). Social learning processes can be promoted if schools build organisational structures (e.g. Communities of Practice) to support and encourage processes of interrogation and reflection (Ainscow and Sandhill 2010), thus facilitating opportunities for the SENCOs to act as advocate leaders. Harris and Jones (2020, p. 5) noted that ‘the idea of the schools as a *professional learning community* connects closely with the notion of a *school as a learning organisation*’. Critical to leading change in schools is the importance of community of practice approaches to professional learning (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021).

Developing collaborative and supportive practices between colleagues, which are based on trust, and respect needs unwavering leadership from the Principal of a school (Bottery 2006). A Principal’s role as a transformational leader is now reconfigured as a facilitator and supporter of school-wide change (Bottery 2006). This is in contrast to the approaches of a transactional leader (Bottery 2006), which could be described as oppressive. The transformational leader is closely linked to the learning organisation and this association dates back several decades (Harris and Jones, 2020). The school Principal is a key driver in cultivating inclusive cultures (O Gorman and Drudy 2011; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020; Walsh 2021). According to Riehl (2000), school Principals can support the embedding of inclusive culture and practice in three ways; they endorse new meaning about difference and diversity which are embedded in social responses: they enable and encourage inclusive practices for all teachers; and they develop collaborative and cooperative relationships within the school and other schools in the wider community to strengthen inclusive culture on a continuous basis. Could it be said that SENCOs are now undertaking these roles as they lead SEN provision and the inclusive agenda in schools? A school’s culture, context and processes of collaboration are crucial factors in fostering positive organisational change (Ainscow and Sandhill 2010; Hargreaves and Fullan 2012).

Adopting a distributed whole-school approach to leaderships fosters teacher (SENCO) agency and promotes teacher leadership. Morrissey (2021, p.24) asserted that teacher leadership ‘is a distinct manifestation of the distributed leadership model’. While traditionally Principals were viewed as the main source of educational expertise in a school, teacher leadership views that teachers (i.e. SENCOs) can also have

influence outside of their own classroom setting in developing the school in line with the school's shared vision and values (Lai and Cheung 2015). Lai and Cheung (2015) also indicated that teacher leadership is transformational in nature, supports school development, and functions effectively in communities of practice. York-Barr and Duke (2004) provided an integrated definition of teacher leadership as:

The process by which teachers individually or collectively influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement.

York-Barr and Duke (2004, pp.287-288)

An approach that promotes teacher leadership can result in teachers with expertise and qualifications in SEN, such as the SENCO, adopting the position of 'teacher leaders' who support staff and colleagues with advice and guidance on inclusive practices designed to promote meaningful inclusion (Mulrine and Huckvale 2014, p.61) and advocate for those pupils who may be marginalised within the system. Struyve *et al.* (2018, p.701) asserted that findings of their study demonstrated that 'SENCOs received the legitimacy to act as teacher leaders ... when school principals were willing to release power'. It could be inferred that this approach gives SENCOs the agenda to develop, promote and advocate for inclusive practices. Despite these approaches there is a need for a leadership model that recognises that schools can be 'sites of struggle over material and cultural resources and ideological commitments' (Anderson 2009), that advocates for inclusion and challenges these 'ideological commitments' and neo-liberal discourses aimed at the promotion of academic standards. Advocacy leadership, which is discussed in the next section, has been proposed as such a model (Anderson 2009; Anderson and Cohen 2015; Clarke and Done 2021) and as an activist approach to leadership in response to neo-liberal reforms (Anderson 2009).

2.15 Advocacy Leadership and the SENCO role

Neo-liberal managerialism, accountability agendas and a focus on academic performance in educational systems creates tensions for SENCOs when promoting school-wide practices for all. SENCOs often find themselves trapped in 'atheoretical

bubbles’ where ‘harmful ideological shifts’ which are formed due to ‘policy turbulence’ can become insurmountable (Hallett 2022, p.10) and dominate the landscape and their professional identity. Internationally, some SENCOs are navigating school cultures where academic performance is prioritised and others operate in schools with disproportionate numbers of pupils with additional needs, due to market forces and exclusionary practices of other schools (Exley and Ball 2011; Ball 2018). In Ireland, the education system is characterised by highly prescriptive national curriculum with standardised assessment of performance at various stages is audited and used to profile schools (DES 2017a; Kenny *et al.* 2020; DE 2024). Such scenarios emphasise the need for SENCOs to advocate effectively for those at risk of marginalisation and exclusion (Clarke and Done 2021). In order to develop inclusive education within these existing tensions there is a need for SENCOs to act as advocates for young people with SEND and their families (Clarke and Done 2021). What is important for these pupils is how SENCOs act as ‘advocates’ to prevent them becoming increasingly marginalised both in the school setting and wider society (Graham *et al.* 2019; Lee 2020). Advocacy leadership has emerged as an approach that SENCOs can adopt to prevent the exclusionary practices that disproportionately affect pupils with SEN and/ or disabilities (Anderson 2009; Clarke and Done 2021; Done *et al.* 2023). It is imperative that such a leadership approach is enacted by SENCOs so that ‘students perceived as non-contributors in the drive for academic excellence’ are not ‘removed from classes, or indeed, from school’ (Done *et al.* 2023, p.210). It has been highlighted that SENCOs should exercise advocacy leadership to reduce or eliminate discriminatory or exclusionary practices within schools (Done *et al.* 2023) and prevent the marginalisation of pupils with additional needs in both schools and wider society (Anderson 2009; Clarke and Done 2021). When this model is adopted SENCOs advocate for young people with SEND and their families (Clarke and Done 2021). Hallett (2022) asserts that there is a need for SENCOs to ‘expose silences’, address anomalies in practice and contest the underlying assumptions so that exclusionary practices can be challenged. Mac Ruairc (2013, p.16) has referred to the ‘darker side of leadership practice’ where he insists that challenging common practices in schools, for example ability grouping, requires leadership skills to challenge the status quo in order to promote more inclusive practices (Raftery 2021).

Clarke and Done (2021, p.167) align this ‘care-based advocacy role’ with Kearns’s (2005) SENCO as ‘Rescuer’ typology. Anderson (2009, p.14) provided a description of an ‘advocacy leader’ as follows:

An advocacy leader believes in the basic principles of a high quality and equitable public education for all children and is willing to take risks to make it happen. Advocacy leaders tend to be skilled at getting beneath high-sounding rhetoric to the devil in the details.

Anderson (2009, p.14)

Advocacy leaders ‘draw an ethical line that cannot be crossed – not to be authoritarian, but to defend against the powerful using their power against the powerless’ (Anderson 2009, pp.14-15). These leaders operate at multiple levels and recognise systemic problems that may exist in classrooms and schools and seek solutions that aim to address the causes of these problems (Anderson 2009). Such leaders have ‘a well-developed social analysis, but do not agree on all issues, and do not follow the party-line...they are constantly pushing their comfort zone’ and they ‘create learning communities in their schools’ (Anderson 2009, p.14). These leaders possess the confidence and information needed to challenge SLT decision-making (Done *et al.* 2023) to ensure that pupils experience an inclusive education.

In order to enact an advocacy leadership approach, it is imperative that SENCOs are equipped with knowledge, capacity and skill sets that allow them to challenge decision-making and interrogate policy, legislation and rhetoric in a manner that promotes and ensures inclusive education for all. For SENCOs to advocate and contest exclusionary practices they require ‘a high level of critical literacy, a capacity to develop and promote an alternative school vision, and the research skills and confidence to influence SLT thinking’ (Done *et al.* 2023, p.203). There is a need for SENCOs to develop their understanding and appreciation of theoretical perspectives to enable them to advocate for pupils with SEN and to prevent them from unknowingly contributing to forms of ‘othering’ (Hallett 2022). This concept ‘othering’ is at the centre of disability studies and relates to pupils who are ‘othered’ by the system due to merely having a disability and/ or special educational need (Hallett 2022). SENCOs should focus on engagement with theoretical perspectives rather than engagement with policy documents to prevent this ‘othering’ (Hallett 2022) and to enhance their capability to advocate for such pupils. A central characteristic of the SENCO role is arguably practical wisdom (Hallett 2022) which requires ‘inclusiveness, foresight and

decisiveness’ (Cowan 2017, p.6). According to Hallett (2022), this characteristic is needed for SENCOs to recognise anomalies in practice, enact innovation and possess the bravery to ‘expose the silences, inconsistencies, contradictions and incompleteness relative to their grounding assumptions (Skrtic 1991, p.152 cited in Hallett 2022). Consequently, the development of such practical wisdom is necessary for the promotion of a SENCO’s advocacy leadership.

University-based Master’s level programmes, such as the NASENCo in England, have been designed to develop such capacities and equip SENCOs to engage in research-based and strategic advocacy leadership (Done *et al.* 2023). In order to meet the standards and learning outcomes of the NASENCo (NCTL 2014), SENCOs must show knowledge and evidence of key areas, such as:

the regulatory contexts, leadership, strategies for improving outcomes, working strategically, challenging senior leaders, implementing systems and structures, and ensuring a school-wide culture of high expectations.

(Kay *et al.* 2022, p.344)

The development of these key areas would contribute to enhancing the SENCOs’ competency to act as advocacy leaders. In England, there have been moves to downgrade this Master’s level programme to an unaccredited national professional qualification, which will become the National Professional Qualification for SENCOs from September 2024. Done *et al.* (2023) purports that this would risk the deprofessionalisation of SENCOs, is linked to an academisation agenda and neglects the need for critical literacy and research-informed inclusive practices for SENCOs. Consequently, it is argued that such a move would inhibit the potential of SENCOs to enact advocacy leadership approaches and contribute to the discriminatory and exclusionary practices that disproportionately affect pupils with SEND (Done *et al.* 2023).

2.16 Theme Three Conclusion

The importance and influence of school leadership in promoting meaningful inclusion and in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning is clearly evident in the literature. A school-wide collaborative and distributed approach, with the SENCO at the helm to guide, mentor and empower teachers, is imperative in promoting inclusive special

education and school development in line with the shared vision, goals and values. Such an approach has the potential to foster an effective and impactful approach to the provision of SEN across the school. Central to this is the Principal as a transformational leader supporting the SENCO and teachers to develop agency and autonomy to act as leaders to advocate for pupils with additional needs. Given a focus on neo-liberal managerialism, academisation and accountability agendas, it is vital that SENCOs act as advocate leaders to minimise discriminatory and exclusionary practices that disproportionately affect pupils with SEN and/ or disabilities. Finally, bridging social capital approaches and distributed leadership can lead to the development of systematic collaborative and collective approaches to inclusive special education and the creation of the school as a learning organisation and the promotion of the concept ‘leadership for learning’. SENCOs must advocate for all pupils and lead in a manner ‘that mobilises the masses to make the moral imperative a reality’ (Fullan 2011, p.18).

Theme Four: Professional Learning and the SENCO Role

2.17 Theme Four Introduction

In this section, the extant literature related to the teachers' professional learning, professional learning and inclusive education, SETAM and professional learning, professional learning and the SENCO role, as well as collaborative practices to professional learning are reviewed. Models of CPD are detailed and emphasises is placed on the professional learning needs of the SENCO role.

2.18 Teachers' Professional Learning

Internationally, ambitious targets for education reform are being set by policy makers and governments. Improvement agendas vary across nations but a commonality in most large-scale educational reform efforts is that teachers are fundamental to and inseparable from that reform (Patfield 2021). With the critical 'enactors' of education policy being teachers (Ball *et al.* 2012), they facilitate the changes that occur in classroom practices (OECD 2019). Teacher professional development is recognised by the OECD as an essential element of inclusive education. Teachers' lifelong learning and career development is a key priority within the EU and internationally. In Ireland, the Teaching Council, which is the statutory professional standards body, is mandated in law to promote and regulate the teaching profession. The Council was established in 2006 and since then it has been building a framework of standards for three stages of teachers' learning. These stages, which span a teachers' career, are initial, induction and the ongoing process of teacher learning, also known as in-service teacher education (The Teaching Council 2016). The framework for teachers' learning in Ireland is evolving in line with international developments and is moving towards a strategic approach to lifelong learning within the continuum of teacher education. Internationally, organisations such as the UN, UNESCO, OECD, World Health Organisation (WHO) and the World Bank have identified key issues, which would indicate that educational policy should treat teacher professional learning as a continuum from ITE to CPD (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) 2019). In addition, UNESCO (2015, p.21) noted that 'a coherent

teacher education framework will include three interrelated stages: initial teacher preparation, an induction period and CPD or in-service training (INSET)’.

In Ireland, the *Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education* (2011) set out the Council’s intentions with regard to teachers’ CPD. It indicated that renewal of registration with the Teaching Council would be subject to the receipt of evidence in relation to any CPD engagement (The Teaching Council 2011) as is the case in other countries. In 2016, the new framework for teachers’ learning named Cosán (meaning pathway in English), was published following a comprehensive consultation process with teachers and other stakeholders. There has been a change from the use of ‘teacher professional development’ in previous Irish Educational policies to ‘teachers’ professional learning’ in the Cosán document. The definition used for teachers’ professional learning in the Cosán document is referenced to the 2011 Teaching Council document, *Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education*, and is as follows:

Continuing professional development (CPD) refers to the lifelong teacher learning and comprises the full range of educational experiences designed to enrich teachers’ professional knowledge, understanding and capabilities throughout their careers.

(The Teaching Council 2011, p. 9)

While this definition uses the term ‘teacher learning’ it also incorporates ‘CPD’ and does not necessarily distinguish between CPD or teacher professional learning. Adakah (2023) noted that some researchers in this domain equate professional development with professional learning, while others would promote the distinction between both terms. Fraser *et al.* (2007) refers to professional development as a process of change that impacts the entire teaching profession and to professional learning as particular activities centred on the specific learning of individuals or groups. It has been argued in the literature that a distinction should be made between professional development and professional learning (Webster-Wright 2009; Vermunt *et al.* 2019) and the distinction equates to the difference between instruction and learning, teaching and learning and learning environments and learning (Vermunt *et al.* 2019). Professional development has been defined by Vermunt *et al.* (2019, p.62) as ‘a program, or a learning environment, which may have specific features’. On the other hand, teacher learning has been defined as ‘processes and outcomes through which teachers increase or change their professional knowledge, understanding, skills

and attitudes’ (Vermunt *et al.* 2019, p.62). Mockler (2013, p.36) also noted that professional learning ‘constitutes the processes that teachers engage in when they expand, refine and change their practice’ and that professional development experiences may lead to professional learning but that these experiences do not necessarily equate with such learning. This distinction is also referred to by Timperley *et al.* (2007) who noted that professional development equates to the delivery of activities and processes, and that professional learning is the internal process of creating knowledge and expertise. Within this thesis these distinctions and definitions will be adopted when referring to professional development and professional learning.

Models of CPD have been proposed along a spectrum from transmissive to transformative, which ultimately seeks to increase teachers’ capacity for autonomy and agency (Kennedy 2005, 2014). In her original paper, Kennedy (2005) detailed nine models of CPD and these were slightly amended in 2014 in line with a spectrum of categories of models. These are detailed in Table 2.3 below.

Table 2.3: Spectrum of CPD Models (adapted from Kennedy (2014, p.693))

Purpose of Model		Examples of models of CPD which may fit within this category
Transmissive		Training models Deficit models Cascade models
Malleable	Increasing capacity for professional autonomy and teacher agency	Award-bearing models Standards-based models Coaching/ mentoring models Community of practice models
Transformative	↓	Collaborative professional inquiry models

Within this model, different types of CPD are aligned to the three spectrum categories. For example, award-bearing models can include postgraduate degrees,

which are placed within the malleable model as they can be ‘liberating, empowering and a significant contributing factor to enhancing teacher agency’ (Kennedy 2014, p.693). The transformative model refers to activities that involve teachers asking critical questions of their practice and engaging in teacher research and collaborative problem-solving (Kennedy 2014; de Paor and Murphy, 2017) and this category is more a reflection of professional learning than a CPD model (Kennedy 2014). As teachers progress along the spectrum there is a potential enhanced opportunity for the teachers to develop professional autonomy and teacher agency. Aspects of this framework and spectrum are reflected within the approach taken by the Teaching Council (2016) in the Cosán document, such as the central focus on reflective practice and collaborative learning (The Teaching Council 2016). In addition, the Council highlighted the role of collaborative inquiry when they noted ‘school-based collaborative inquiry carried out by teachers in teams or groups and supported by teacher education departments, is a valuable model for CPD’ (Teaching Council 2011, p.18).

Teachers’ professional learning is now recognised in the Cosán framework as the intellectual, personal, and professional growth of teachers and not just merely an upskilling matter of knowledge and skills. The Council is working to develop a culture of ‘powerful professional learning’, which is based on the active engagement of teachers in their own learning for the benefit of themselves and their students (The Teaching Council 2016, p. 3). The new framework recognises that professional learning is ‘part and parcel of a teachers’ working life’ (The Teaching Council 2016, p.2). Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2017) have noted that the characteristics of effective teacher professional development are: supportive school leadership and culture; reflective; focus on student outcomes; sustained over time; incorporate models of effective practice; supported by specialist expertise; and are collaborative. O’Sullivan *et al.* (2012) conducted research in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and found that the most common form of professional development was in-service courses, workshops and education conferences, yet they rated these as being less impactful on their professional practice than collaborative research and approaches. McElearney *et al.* (2018) in their large-scale survey based study, which investigated how primary school teachers in Northern Ireland accessed professional development, found that almost all reported engaging with professional development. The teachers, however,

engaged in forms of development, such as courses, workshops and conferences that lack association in research with improving practice and pupil outcomes. The preferred approaches to professional development were collaborative (group work, cluster groups, coaching and mentoring and activity-based sessions) and interactive (reflective, collegial discussion and use of case study examples) but only a minority of teachers engaged in these forms (McElearney *et al.* 2018).

In Ireland, policies relating to professional learning have evolved, and the Cosán framework (2016) acknowledges that to ensure quality in the development of a profession, it must be responsive to emerging needs and to school improvement (The Teaching Council 2016). It also acknowledges that for sustained opportunities to reflect on the processes of learning, teaching and assessment are crucial. It is noted in the policy document that the best systems are those that are more teacher-led rather than provider-driven CPD, allowing for teachers to use their autonomy around choice although the supported CPD should address the school and system needs. The Cosán framework (The Teaching Council 2016) outlines that developments are challenging traditional practices and require teachers to shift their thinking, which is necessary for rich opportunities in teacher learning. The main developments in thinking that are of importance regarding learning, assessment and leadership outlined in the document are:

- that opportunities to learn are inseparable from the context, relationships and views of valued knowledge;
- that formative assessment is crucial to learning;
- that all teachers are leaders; and
- that participation by teachers in communities of practice enables them to extend their expertise.

(The Teaching Council 2016, p.5)

It is noted in the Cosán framework document that students' learning depends on teachers' learning as much as their teaching, which is fundamental for every teacher, for every school, for every organisation and association that is involved in education and certainly for society as a whole (The Teaching Council 2016). It is fundamental that every teacher is equipped with the learning that supports the skills and knowledge that is current for all learners. Cosán is a flexible framework, which recognises teachers as professionals that are autonomous and responsible for

identifying and undertaking relevant learning opportunities. The framework has elicited the Department of Education to provide appropriate structures, resources and processes to support professional learning opportunities. Oide, for example, was established by the Department of Education on September 1st 2023 through the amalgamation of the Centre for School Leadership, Junior Cycle for Teachers, the National Induction Programme for Teachers and the Professional Development Service for Teachers. The supports offered by Oide are aligned with the principles, values and standards underpinning Cosán (The Teaching Council n.d.). While Broderick (2019, p.96) concluded that Cosán will be ‘both a practical and successful teacher professional learning framework’, little, if any, research has been published to date to provide empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of this framework.

2.19 Professional Learning and Inclusive Special Education

It was acknowledged by the OECD in 2005 that teacher professional development is essential in moving toward inclusive education and the use of inclusive practices in schools. It was put forward that teachers are expected to develop knowledge on special education, on working with support personnel and on appropriate teaching processes. The OCED report *Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility* in 2018 suggested that having qualified and well-trained teachers is imperative in realising the goal of educating all learners. Policy documents by UNESCO highlight the urgency for countries to develop policies designed to support teacher professional learning for inclusion (EASNIE 2019). The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2011) noted that in an inclusive system, there are demands for skilled teachers in the necessary practices. Subban and Sharma (2006) commented that teacher registration bodies in Western countries, such as Australia, have made it a mandatory requirement for all teachers to complete modules in SEN or inclusive education as part of their training. This requirement is based on the assumption that without such training, teachers would be ill equipped to meet the diverse needs of their student cohorts (Sharma *et al.* 2012). Sharma and Morton (2022) indicated that there is agreement in the literature (for example UNESCO 2018; Florian and Camedda 2020) that teacher education can play a central contribution in achieving the aims of inclusive education and inclusive societies. Internationally the Consortium of

Inclusive Teacher Education and Development (CITED) was established in 2017 with the shared commitment to teacher education for inclusive education (Sharma and Morton 2022). Finally, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) (2019, p.59), which is an independent organisation promoting collaboration between countries on inclusive education systems, concluded that important issues and policy recommendations for teacher professional learning for inclusion in international policy and the literature are:

- the need to include all education staff in teacher professional learning for inclusion, at all stages of a professional career and across educational roles;
- the need to enhance a deeper and broader understanding of inclusion, across diversity challenges and beyond classroom practice; and
- the need for specialist professional learning as professional teacher support.

In Ireland, it is outlined by the Teaching Council (2016) that teachers' lifelong learning and career development are key priorities internationally and in the EU in light of the changing education landscape. The Council note that CPD in particular, is critical to ensure that teachers are prepared to overcome the challenges of expanding fields of knowledge, diverse student cohorts, new and varied responsibilities and higher social expectations of schools (The Teaching Council 2016). Having said this however, inclusion has been identified as one of the priority learning areas in the Cosán framework (The Teaching Council 2016) but it does not distinctly recommend any specific standards or competencies in inclusive practices and any policy changes to enhance engagement in this have been resisted (McCormack 2019). This results in teachers working with learners with complex additional needs who are not required to engage in any specific CPD to support inclusive education practices (McCormack 2019).

As far back as 2010, O' Gorman and Drudy in their large-scale study, which yielded information from 816 schools, recommended that there is a requirement for training for all teachers in delivering inclusion in schools. They insisted that to promote inclusive practices there is a need for professional development to highlight the importance of teamwork and collaborative practices with colleagues, other professionals and parents. The study reported that there was an emphasis on individuals developing their own expertise rather than a collective and distributed

expertise to promote a culture of inclusivity among the whole-school. O’Gorman and Drudy (2010) argued that:

Instead of responding to gradually evolving change, an alternative, more revolutionary approach to professional development could be adopted to challenge ‘conventional wisdom’ and promote a truly inclusive education system in Ireland.

(O’Gorman and Drudy 2010, p.157)

Smith and Broomhead (2019) noted that all teachers are now teachers of SEN. In Ireland, there are efforts to strengthen teacher education for inclusion, with a focus on ITE. Hick *et al.* (2018) explored student teachers’ preparedness for teaching all children in a longitudinal study that was commissioned by the NCSE. A total of 430 student teachers reported that in relation to developing values and attitudes that equip them for inclusive teaching they felt well prepared but yet felt lacking in confidence in their knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices. This concurs with Forlin (2010) and O’Donnell (2012) who documented that ITE does not appropriately prepare teachers to effectively implement inclusive practices. In 2020, The Teaching Council published a keystone document in the continuum of teacher education, namely *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education*. This document sets out the requirements, which all higher education institutions in teacher education must meet for accreditation purposes (The Teaching Council 2020). Inclusive education is recognised as a core element of all ITE programmes and the Council is of the opinion that ‘good inclusive teaching is good teaching’ (The Teaching Council 2020, p.18). The Council highlights that inclusive education includes:

...the fostering of appropriate learning environments, including digital ones, that support the development of student teachers’ ability to provide further learning needs of all pupils by utilising, for example, universal design for learning framework.

(The Teaching Council 2020, p.14)

Changes, therefore to ITE programmes include core elements, which are focused on inclusive education and incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approaches and placements in a SEN setting for student teachers. ITE programmes now need to aim to improve student teachers ‘capacity to address and respond to the diversity of learners’ needs’ which includes ‘additional learning needs (e.g. autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia) and learning needs associated with diverse linguistic,

socioeconomic, cultural and ethnic (including Traveller community, Roma) backgrounds' (The Teaching Council 2020, p.4). This is an important development as ITE is the start of the teacher professional learning continuum and journey. In addition, competency development for inclusion needs to commence from the beginning of a teacher's professional learning, that is, ITE (EASNIE 2019).

It is also fundamental that SETs are equipped with opportunities for learning the current skills needed in their role to work alongside all class teachers and to teach all learners. Raftery (2021) insisted that a PLD programme for SETs should be completed by every teacher in the role, each year to ensure learners are receiving quality support. It could be questioned whether this is feasible due to various barriers, such as lack of cover and lack of available time. It is highlighted in this study that there is no obligation for SETs to complete PLD specific to their role even though this was recommended in the document published by the NCSE in 2014, *Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs: A better and more equitable way*. This document acknowledges the importance of support teachers being 'trained and equipped to assess and teach all students with special educational needs and to advise and assist other teachers' (NCSE 2014, p.77). There is no suggestion in the document of designating or appointing a coordinator to be responsible for leading the SEN provision in schools. It is expected instead, that within the SETAM that schools adopt the whole-school approach to educating all, with a recommendation that 'continuing professional development should be specifically designed for Principals who will require support in managing the process' (NCSE 2014, p.52). Raftery (2021) outlined the importance of PLD for class teachers and SETs to meet the growing and diverse needs in school. Raftery (2021) suggested that the Cosán framework could formalise and take ownership of their PLD needs and emphasised the importance of PLD for inclusive practice. It is fundamental that SENCOs have the learning opportunities to develop their skill set and knowledge to lead and manage both class teachers and SETs in developing their skills to teach all learners. Empirical research has identified the need for SENCOs to avail of professional learning in the area of leadership and management in SEN and school-wide collaborative inclusive practices (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017, Fitzgerald and Radford 2020; Holland 2022; Walsh 2023).

2.20 The Special Education Teachers Allocation Model and Professional Learning

The Department of Education introduced the SETAM in 2017 which emphasised a whole-school collaborative approach to provision for students with SEN and aimed to change teachers' practices and duties, as greater levels in teacher autonomy in 'how to manage and deploy additional teaching support' (DES 2017a, p.2) came into effect. Raftery (2021) undertook a small-scale study, which examined the perspectives and experiences of Irish primary school Principals on the SETAM. In this study, seven Principals were interviewed in relation to the opportunities and challenges faced by Principals and teachers in supporting SEN in an inclusive way following the introduction of SETAM. The researcher found that there are complexities with leadership for inclusion, managing change and providing opportunities for PLD. The challenges around providing opportunities for PLD were brought to the forefront as a serious barrier to inclusion in the study. Raftery (2021) highlighted that teachers were not permitted to attend PLD courses that were being provided during the school day as there was a lack of teachers to cover this time. He outlined that under SETAM it is particularly important to develop professional learning that meets the needs of all learners (Raftery 2021). All teachers were now responsible for identifying and prioritising pupils with the greatest need and allocating resources accordingly.

Curtin and Egan's (2021) study, which examined the perspectives and experiences of teachers who had been working under the SETAM policy (DES 2017a) since September 2017, found that teachers reported difficulties accessing PLD opportunities. The survey respondents (n=47) of the national online survey, which included administrative and teaching Principals (20), SENCOs (11), class teachers (7) and SETs (9), found that 40 % of the sample received CPD regarding the introduction of SETAM in terms of assessment and identification of pupils' needs. This number indicates that minimum supports and professional development were accessed by teachers, who were now faced with increased responsibility and autonomy to identify learners in need of additional supports. This study also found that many teachers in Ireland felt inadequately prepared to identify pupil needs, and that 94 % of participants expressed an interest in undertaking CPD on the best practices in this area. This demonstrates the importance of and the need for CPD for school staff in special

education and in all areas across schools, which has been identified in many studies in Ireland (DES 2016; NCSE 2013). Raftery (2021) noted that the SETAM is reflective of the broader view of SEN where the needs of children, such as academic, sensory, language or social and emotional needs, are placed on the continuum (DES 2007). Some children's needs can be met at classroom support level and more complex needs may be met through class teacher and SET collaborations. This all leads to teachers needing support in professional learning due to the changes being bestowed on them and changes in how schools are providing SEN provision under SETAM. Curtin and Egan's (2021) findings indicated that increased collaboration and the use of in-class support emerged as a benefit of the SETAM. The most frequently used co-teaching approaches to meet the needs of learners with additional needs were Station Teaching and Team Teaching. Walsh (2020) also found that in-class support was the preferred model of provision in her small-scale study, which explored how support teachers contribute to the leadership and management of SEN provision in mainstream primary schools. Teacher professional learning is necessary for successful implementation of the inclusive practices identified above, such as collaboration and in-class support that have emerged from the introduction of the SETAM.

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2.21 Professional Learning and the SENCO Role

O' Gorman and Drudy (2011), in their large-scale research exploring the professional learning needs of SETs in Ireland, more than a decade ago, identified the need for all SEN teachers to be trained in leadership, teamwork and collaboration as it was more than likely, that at some stage, SETs would manage SEN provision in the school. They recommended the establishment of a special needs advisor (akin to SENCO) that has management capacity to coordinate SEN in schools. The SENCO could then act as a consultant for the school community, within a management role, which would have implications for their professional learning needs (O'Gorman and Drudy 2011). Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) also recommended, in line with Hornby's model of inclusive special education (2015), that SENCOs should undergo specific training regarding special education and leadership to support a school-wide, universal approach while also having skills, knowledge and competencies in special education to support the needs of children with more distinct and unique needs. They noted that

CPD for SENCOs is based on their learning needs as strategic system leaders and not just as specialists in special education. Their findings suggest that having specialist knowledge is essential, but the ability to develop collaborative approaches to teaching and learning, the ability to lead professional development initiatives and to develop competency in leading change are also important to lead a SEN approach that is universal. In Irish policy documentation there is an expectation that the SENCO will have an understanding of issues relating to special education (DES 2007; DES 2017a; DE 2024), however this is not compulsory and practice can differ. In the UK it is mandated that the SENCO or ‘coordinating’ position undertakes post-graduate professional development (Winwood 2013) and completes a postgraduate award, the NASENCo. This SENCO postgraduate training is focused on developing effective systems to promote inclusive and special education from a whole-school perspective. SENCOs who have completed this training reported that it raised their leadership profile, although a significant number felt that their ability to influence whole-school policy was limited due to viewing their identity as middle managers as opposed to strategic leaders (Brown and Doveston 2014). There is no such training akin to the NASENCo in Ireland specific to the SENCO role. The Postgraduate Diploma in Inclusive Special Education in Ireland, funded by the Department of Education, is somewhat similar but boarder. While it does not specifically address the SENCO needs, it does include content related to the concept of leadership.

Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) insist that the development of SENCO specific postgraduate programme, which targets all post-primary schools is needed. Walsh (2020) commented that in order to enhance the roles of leaders and skills of those working in SEN in primary schools, courses that lead to formal postgraduate qualifications in SEN must be available to increase professional capital, confidence, and competence. However, the feasibility of such mandatory programmes may be questionable from a budgetary and logistic perspective and the mandating of such programmes could potentially act as a barrier for a teacher to assume the SENCO role.

In inclusive schools, a whole-school approach is promoted and there is collective responsibility for students with additional needs. To support the sharing of responsibility it is essential that there are effective systems for inclusion at whole-school level in place (Fitzgerald 2015; Oldham and Radford 2011). The SENCO has been working in isolated roles, which have arisen from ‘grafted on’ (Shevlin and

Banks 2021) approaches to educating students with additional needs. In order for a SENCO to work and respond to a range of needs that exist across a school community with whole-school responses, which are integrated, collective, and collaborative there must be a move away from the view of a SENCO as just the ‘Expert’ responsible for educating children with diverse learning needs (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017; Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021). Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) commented that collaborative and relational skills will move SENCOs away from expert models of SEN to SENCOs that are specialist teachers, collaborators and leaders in integrated inclusive systems. These authors also indicated that SENCO agency may flourish when a school develops systematic approaches to collaboration. Ainscow and Sandhill (2010) noted that if systems of inclusive practice are developed from a whole-school perspective to include the learning needs of all, using a collective, whole-school approach this could signify that approaches to educating all are no longer bolted on to the curriculum (Norwich 2010). If SENCOs are to advise and consult on inclusive curricular and pedagogical approaches and be the whole-school pedagogical leads (Arnaiz and Catejon 2001, Hallett 2022) in schools, this will require formal repositioning and formal recognition of the role (Fitzgerald 2022). If they are to become collaborators and co-leaders in providing a graduated response to a continuum of need (Fitzgerald 2022), this will all have implications on SENCOs’ professional learning. In 2018, the EASNIE, published their review document entitled, *Supporting Inclusive School Leadership*, and commented that new and experienced school leaders should have access to CPD opportunities designed to update their skills and inform them of new developments. This is imperative as school leaders in OECD countries indicated that they lacked the necessary training for their roles (Schleicher 2012). Billingsley *et al.* (2018) reported that a barrier to the development of inclusive schools is a lack of professional development for school leaders. The EASNIE (2018) suggested that coaching, mentoring, and support networks (local, regional and national) could provide professional development opportunities for school leaders and allow them to collaborate and share new insights, experience and expertise.

2.22 Collaborative Approaches to Teachers' Professional learning

Teachers engage in a broad range of learning processes with teacher reflection and collaboration being central and this is also recognised in the Cosán framework (The Teaching Council 2016). It is not indicated in the framework where time for professional learning opportunities will come from, yet appealing to the goodwill of teachers and 'stealing time' are the only basis which can facilitate reflection, collaboration and sharing expertise (Broderick 2019). As teachers are experiencing increased pressure in their working day this can leave little time for professional collaboration and learning. Broderick (2019) looked at comparing this to an international equivalent. Scotland has negotiated time for professional development with teachers as part of their employment contract as a result of the McCrone report (Scottish Executive Education Department 2000). It has been warned by Coolahan *et al.* (2017) that unless this happens in Ireland the potential of the Cosán framework will not be reached and teacher professional learning will not receive the same status as other professions, such as nursing for instance.

It has been found in the literature that short-term professional learning courses and attending seminars can help SENCOs learn about new developments in the field, but yet it does not provide them with the expertise and authority necessary to work with and guide their colleagues (Agaliotis and Kalyva, 2011; Crowther *et al.* 2001). It is however, a process of deep learning and engagement that successfully implements new practices or successfully adopts new methodologies in schools (King 2014; Raftery 2021). This concurs with Brennan *et al.* (2021) who indicated that innovative approaches to collaboration can significantly contribute to develop inclusive schools and recommends that Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) become a central feature in whole-school practice. Communities of practice, such as PLCs, are composed of a group of people who share a common concern and interest in a certain topic (Cambridge *et al.* 2005). Wenger and Trayner (2015) have described communities of practice as groups of people who share a concern or passion for what they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. Communities of practice provide a model for connecting people with a focus on learning, collaboration, as well as knowledge and best practice sharing (Cambridge *et al.* 2005). According to Wenger (1998), the benefits of membership of such a community include: networking; resource development; expertise access; assistance with challenges; upskilling on

relevant developments; sharing of resources; strategy development; and increased confidence. Aligned to this, Cambridge *et al.* (2005) noted that these communities of practices (i.e. PLCs) are important as they connect people, provide a shared context, enable dialogue, stimulate learning, capture and diffuse existing knowledge, introduce collaborative processes, help people organise and generate new knowledge.

To facilitate shared learning between schools of different contexts and structures, PLCs could extend to groups of schools. Banks *et al.* (2016) in a mixed-methods study exploring special classes, found that networks with teachers in similar positions in other schools are likely to lead to greater utilisation of differentiation in the classrooms and enhance teachers' confidence. Creating networks or communities of practice (Wenger 1998; Ainscow and Sandhill 2010) in this way, may change the thinking around what colleagues do as they work toward a collective goal while collaborating, problem solving and reflecting on their actions (Ainscow and Sandhill 2010). PLCs can support this collaboration, which has the potential to develop and sustain inclusive practices over time once initially supported by an external facilitator (Brennan 2017). Space must be created by leaders of inclusion to support innovative models of collaboration, such as PLCs, so that professional learning can develop to empower teacher agency to meet the needs of all learners (Pantic and Florian 2015; King 2016). Networks such as these could provide opportunities for developing collective efficacy and responsibility through mutual dialogue (Hargreaves and O' Connor 2018). Brennan *et al.* (2021) in their qualitative, single-site case study, on supporting the enactment of inclusive pedagogy in a primary school setting reported that 'engagement in inclusive pedagogy in a PLC, underpinned by critical dialogue and public sharing of work, positively impacted teacher attitudes, beliefs, efficacy and inclusive practice' (Brennan *et al.* 2021 p.1540). Brennan and King (2022) conducted a qualitative study in an Irish urban primary school, which aimed to explore the transformative potential of PLCs for enhancing and maintaining teachers PLD for inclusive practice over time. The study involved the participants engaging in PLC for inclusive practice followed by semi-structured interviews and classroom observations two years later. The results from this study reported sustained changes for teachers' inclusive practices, which indicate that 'PLCs can support teachers to develop and sustain inclusive practices in the longer term' (Brennan and King 2022, p.175). Walsh (2021) in her small scale mixed-methods study, explored the role of post-primary

SENCOs in managing and leading a systematic whole-school approach to special and inclusive education in schools, and found that SENCO communities of practice have a positive impact on SENCOs as they were able to connect, learn and grow with others that hold the same roles. These PLCs provide a space for SENCOs to ‘think beyond’ (Hallett 2022) their existing roles and how the role could evolve as a result of collective reflection and consideration of ‘all drivers for change’ (Fitzgerald 2022, p.7).

Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) in their study of SENCOs found that many SENCOs reported a lack of belonging to any team due to the nature of their role. In this study the authors discuss the concept of SENCOs occupying the Third Space (Whitchurch 2008). The Third Space as described by Whitchurch (2008) is a territory that emerges between academic and professional domains within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The space is filled with a merging of identities that work together in a positive way to support members to construct unique and creative profiles using fluidity, creativity and flexibility that is created by this space. According to Fitzgerald and Radford (2017), SENCOs are left to create their own roles and occupy a space that is unknown to them. Fitzgerald (2022) notes that communities of practice and regional and online networks represent the Third Space for SENCOs as they move together away from positions of isolation and uncertainty to a space that offers shared identity, networked leadership, connectedness and sustainable professional learning. It has also been proposed that how SENCOs prioritise their professional development is impacted by how they view their role and identity. SENCOs who align with ‘managerial’ perspectives ‘may value compliance with processes and imposition of structures, which seek to maximise results and cost-effectiveness’ (Kay *et al.* 2022, p.348). Those who identify with ‘democratic perspectives may position inclusion, pupil voice and social belonging as having more value’ (Kay *et al.* 2022, p.348).

Fitzgerald (2022) has highlighted that collaborative, whole-school and distributed approaches are important to ‘leading learning’ and are evident in Irish educational policy frameworks, e.g. *School Self-Evaluation* and *Looking at Our Schools Quality Frameworks for Primary Schools* (DES Inspectorate 2016). Within the school setting distributed models of leadership facilitate engagement by both staff and learners, collaborative planning and continual professional learning (Fitzgerald 2021; Leithwood *et al.* 2020). Such approaches contribute to the school being viewed

as a learning organisation, ‘where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together’ (Senge 1990, p.3).

When schools operate as learning organisations, professional learning is not confined to the school itself (OECD 2016). Teachers and school leaders, e.g. SENCOs, seek out the opportunity to engage in collaborative learning and dialogue with peers in other schools by ‘establishing networks or school-to-school collaborations’ (OECD 2016, p. 9). Such networked learning organisations are flexible and adaptable to changing environmental needs (OECD 2016). The EASNIE (2018) asserted that school leaders are responsible for sustaining and developing a school culture that is ‘collegial, interactive and focused on supporting teachers and learners throughout the educational process’ (EASNIE 2018, p.10). The extent to which the SENCO plays a leadership role in this process is somewhat unclear. The SENCO cannot be solely responsible for special education provision and thus responsibility must become distributed, and the SENCO assume the visionary role providing leadership within the school (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). The SENCO is challenged, however, as they work alongside colleagues who may view inclusive and special education differently (Hallett and Hallett 2010a) while also attempting to influence their colleagues’ attitudes and practices (Busher and Harris 2000) through collaborative professional learning initiatives.

2.23 Theme Four Conclusion

Effective professional learning is paramount for the establishment and implementation of whole-school collaborative inclusive practices within the primary school setting. Netolicky (2016, p.271) has indicated that best practice professional learning models are ‘collaborative and grounded, rather than individual or top-down’. Professional learning should highlight teamwork and collaboration with colleagues, peers and other professionals to promote an inclusive environment (Walsh 2023). O’Gorman and Drudy (2010, p.165) maintain that the development of ‘distributed expertise’ over ‘individual expertise’ should be central to professional development programmes. Professional learning for SENCOs needs to develop their leadership and collaborative skills in order to enhance their ability to mentor, coach, advise and support colleagues

in the development of school-wide inclusive practices and inclusive pedagogical skills (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). In-school and school-to-school communities of practice can potentially facilitate systematic approaches to collaboration and alleviate SENCO isolation thus allowing them to bring their collective learning, knowledge and leadership together for sustained professional learning (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017; O'Hara 2021; Walsh 2023). Schools as learning organisations offers a systematic approach to support effective in-school communities of practice and professional learning however the extent that SENCOs influence practice, act as inclusion visionaries and contributors to 'leadership for learning' (Swaffield and MacBeath 2009) is unclear within the primary school setting.

2.24 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the extant literature related to the key concepts explored within this research study. A critical analysis was provided on the central themes of this literature review, namely *Inclusion, Special Education and Inclusive Special Education; the Role of the SENCO in the Irish and International context; Leadership and the SENCO Role in Primary Schools; and Professional Learning and the SENCO Role*. This review drew on the imperative national and international policies and legislation that has impacted on the promotion of inclusion and the emergence of the SENCO role. The landscape in Ireland is reflective of Hornby's (2015) inclusive special education framework with evidence of this framework in the recent NCSE (2024) policy advice paper on special schools and classes. The SENCO role has emerged in the Irish primary school setting in a policy vacuum with limited large-scale research on the realities, experiences and challenges of the role. Research has identified various enablers and barriers to SENCO role enactment but large-scale research on these factors together with in-depth exploratory examination of the context surrounding these factors is lacking. In order to secure the sustainability of the SENCO role there is the need for research to examine the professional learning needs and the supports needed to allow SENCOs to effectively enact their role. This research study will address these gaps in the literature and extend our understanding of the realities, profile, experiences and challenges of Irish primary school SENCOs.

In order to realise this research aim it is imperative that a theoretical framework is utilised. This literature review has indicated that the SENCO role is complex and is influenced by a raft of interacting and interdependent factors at individual SENCO level, class, school, community and national level. These factors have a cascading effect on the roles and responsibilities, practices and remit of the SENCO at local school level. Consequently, I came to the decision that Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (2005) would serve as an apt theoretical framework to position this study, as it would allow for an exploration of these interacting and interdependent factors. The systems and levels within Bronfenbrenner's framework would allow for an examination of the influence of changes at each level on the realities, practices and experiences of the SENCO. Ultimately, this has the potential to allow for the conceptualisation of the SENCO role in reference to these interacting and interdependent factors.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.0 Theoretical Framework: An Introduction

A theoretical framework can be viewed as a lens, blueprint, or structure for planning and implementing research and for interpreting, analysing and discussing the research findings (Grant and Osanloo 2014; Imenda, 2014; Mertens 2019). It is the application of a theory to provide an explanation of an event and insight into a particular research problem, asserts Imenda (2014). Theories are ‘organised sets of ideas’ that can provide explanations of human development (Kali and Cavanaugh 2010, p.11). In addition, Fox and Bayat (2007, p.29) noted that a theory can be viewed as a set of ‘interrelated propositions, concepts and definitions’ that can be used to predict and explain phenomena (Fox and Bayat 2007, p.29).

The selection and application of a theoretical framework to research is an essential aspect of the research process and can be viewed as the ‘blueprint’ for the entire dissertation inquiry (Grant and Osanloo, 2014). Grant and Osanloo (2014, p. 12) noted that ‘the theoretical framework is the foundation from which all knowledge is constructed (metaphorically and literally) for a research study’. It provides a ‘grounding base, or an anchor’ for the methods and the analysis of a research project (Grant and Osanloo, 2014), serves as a guide and ‘provides structure to define how you will philosophically, epistemologically, methodologically, and analytically approach’ the research project (Grant and Osanloo, 2014, p. 13).

Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory (2005) is the theoretical framework selected for this research. This theoretical framework acted as a guide throughout the research process and was used as an analytical lens for the analysis and discussion of the research findings. In this chapter this theory is outlined together with an analysis of how the theory can be applied to the current research study.

3.1 Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory

According to Lewthwaite (2011), Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory is based on the development of the individual within a series of nested and interconnected systems in an environment unique to the individual. Bronfenbrenner (1989) stated that:

The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive mutual accommodation, throughout the life course, between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded.

Bronfenbrenner (1989, p. 188)

The developing person is seen as the evolving entity who is interacting within a dynamic environment, which is ever-changing resulting in their adaptation and development. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) model consists of four environmental levels, namely the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem (Figure 3.1), with each level impacting in a different manner on the development of the individual at the centre of the system (Onwuegbuzie *et al.* 2013). This developing person is at the centre of the system and for this study the SENCO is positioned in the centre to enable an exploration of the SENCO role and the interdependent and interconnected factors impacting and influencing the enactment of the role. In addition, reference is made within Bronfenbrenner's framework to the chronosystem, which occurs throughout each system and allows for the examination of any changes or consistencies over time for the person and the environment in which they are in (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This system acknowledges 'the impact of events situated in time on development (Dobson and Douglas 2020, p.301) and makes 'the framework more dynamic and complex' (Odom *et al.* 2004, p.38). Each level of the model, which is detailed below, is impacted due to the passage of time.

The microsystem, Level 1 of the system, has been defined by Bronfenbrenner as:

a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical and material characteristics and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality, and systems of belief.

Bronfenbrenner (2005, p.148)

The mesosystem, Level 2, has been defined as:

the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person (e.g., the relations between home and school, school and workplace. In other words, a mesosystem is a system of microsystems.

Bronfenbrenner (2005, p.148)

According to Onwuegbuzie *et al.* (2013), this level refers to the connections and relations among microsystems and contexts, for example the relationship between family and school experiences. Level 3 of Bronfenbrenner's model is the exosystem, which:

encompasses the linkage and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not ordinarily contain the developing person, but in which events occur that influence processes within the immediate setting that does contain that person (e.g., for a child, the relation between the home and the parent's workplace).

Bronfenbrenner (2005, p.148)

In other words, the exosystem involves links between a social setting where the developing person does not have an active role and the individual's immediate setting (Onwuegbuzie *et al.* 2013). The macrosystem, Level 4, consists of:

the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems characteristic of a given culture, subculture, or other broader social context, with particular reference to the developmentally instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options, and patterns of social interchange that are embedded in each of these systems.

Bronfenbrenner (2005, p.149-150)

The macrosystem can be viewed as a 'societal blueprint for a particular culture, subculture or other broader social context' (Bronfenbrenner 2005, p. 150). The system involves the larger cultural context surrounding the person that can potentially influence the person's development (Onwuegbuzie *et al.* 2013). According to Greene (1994), the macrosystem involves the previous systems being placed in the cultural ideologies, attitudes and beliefs of the setting. The macrosystem responds to national and international changes over time, for instance conflict or economic recession, which impacts on the beliefs and cultural ideologies of society. Of late there has been an influx of immigrants (especially from Ukraine) into Ireland due to ongoing conflict in that country. This has impacted on the preceding systems of Bronfenbrenner's

(2005) framework, for example there has been a significant increase in the number of pupils for whom English is an additional language in the Irish school microsystems. In addition, within the school context Anderson *et al.* (2014) indicated that the macrosystem includes political or national agendas and the resulting systems and structures which are imposed on schools. Schools subsequently must operate within these systems and structures and adhere to the national agendas. The national political agendas have a cascading effect across all levels of the framework.

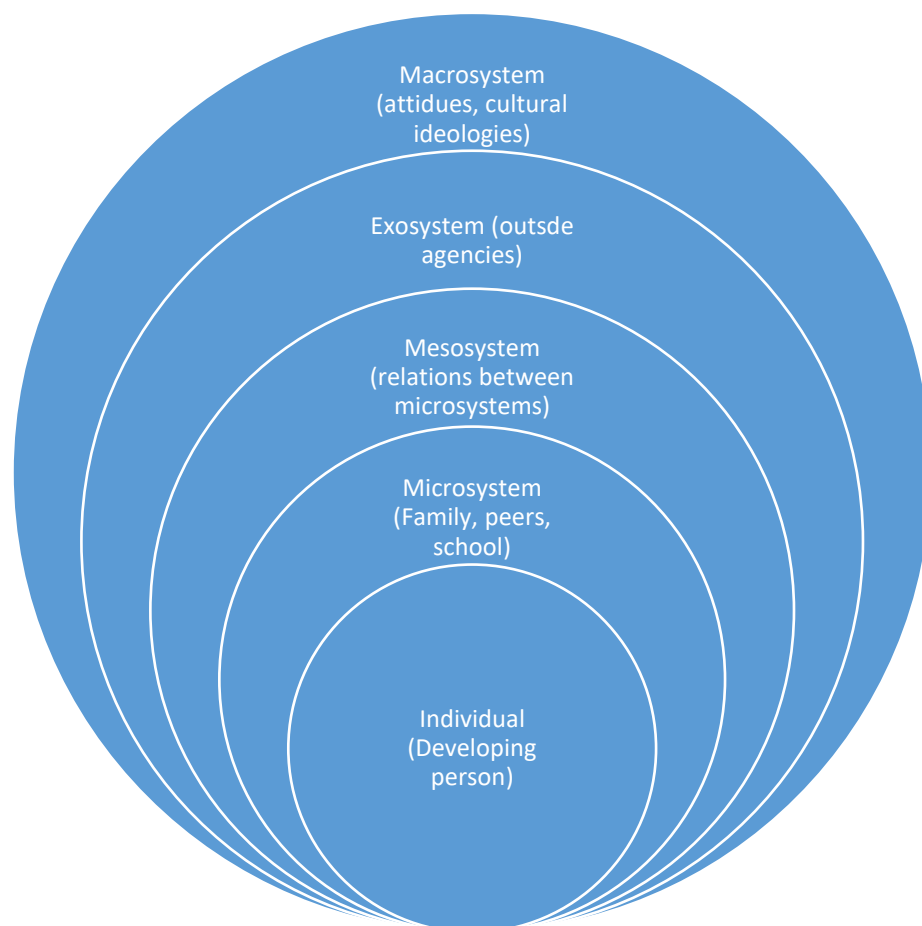


Figure 3.1: Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (adapted from Bronfenbrenneer (2005))

3.2 Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory: Relevance and Application to the Current Research Study

3.2.1 Rationale for selection of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (2005) in this study influenced the methodology, development of the research questions, the analysis of the data and the interpretation of the findings to make sense of the SENCO role in the ecosystem. It acted as a lens and framework to organise and analyse the data and to question, interrogate these data to identify and understand the complexity and interaction of factors influencing the SENCO role in the Irish primary school setting. This framework also allowed for an analysis of the SENCOs' and Principals' perceptions and experiences of the SENCO role. It enabled an examination of the cascading influence of changes at various levels of the bioecological systems model on the SENCO's role and responsibilities. In addition, it allowed for the identification of the barriers and facilitators related to SENCO role enactment positioned within an Inclusive Special Education theoretical approach (Hornby 2015) and the professional learning needs for the SENCO. This framework facilitated an exploration of the contextual dynamics, which interact and are interdependent across the bioecological system in order to make sense of the SENCO role. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory can provide a structure for the analysis of the set of potential influences on the enactment of the SENCO role (Dobson and Douglas 2020). It was also an appropriate framework given the definition of an effective SENCO, which has been defined as follows:

An effective SENCO is a fluid, organic and constantly evolving professional situated in an ever-changing position in a complex mesh of specific legislation, educational structures and expectations.

Morewood (2012, p.74)

Previous research by Dobson and Douglas (2020) used Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (2005) in similar SENCO related research. Long (2017) also utilised Bronfenbrenner's theory (2005) but this research focused on the factors that influenced SETs' acquisition of knowledge and skills for teaching mathematics to pupils. Regarding Dobson and Douglas (2020), these authors used the theory to analyse the different systems of influence that draw teachers into the SENCO position.

Dobson and Douglas (2020) indicated that Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (2005) aptly allowed for the analysis and interrogation of the data and enabled an analysis that revealed the intersecting motives that attract teachers into the SENCO role. Dobson and Douglas (2020) also indicated that the theory has been used in research of specialist teachers (e.g. McLinden *et al.* 2017a), which has examined both individual and broader contextual factors in the education of specialist teachers. The framework was also used by McLinden *et al.* (2017b) to assess how policy makers envisage the role of specialist teachers. According to Dobson and Douglas (2020, p.320), studies such as these outline a more 'holistic overview of the behaviours of individuals within the multiple contexts in which they operate'. This clearly provides support and a rationale for selecting Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems model for the current study. A more in-depth analysis of the interconnecting factors that influence the SENCO's roles and responsibilities was facilitated by the application of the model to this research.

The model used in this study can be viewed as a process-person-context model (Bronfenbrenner 2005). Bronfenbrenner (2005, p.78) specifically defined the properties of this model into three separable domains as follows:

- the context in which development is taking place (for the SENCO this may be the school and the wider socio-political context at the macrosystem level);
- the personal characteristics of the persons present in that context (for the SENCO this may be their personal psychological characteristics and their life and work experiences); and
- the process through which their development is brought about (for the SENCO this may be the professional learning that they undertook to facilitate their SENCO role enactment and the multitude of interactions they have within evolving contexts, which shape this development and lived experience).

These domains should not be separated but instead it is necessary to analyse how they work together (Dobson and Douglas 2020). The process of analysis here 'is subject to the interactive moderating effects of both person and context' (Bronfenbrenner 2005, p.78) and thus selecting and applying Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theory and framework allowed for a more holistic examination of the SENCO role and responsibilities. The research aims and research questions could therefore be

addressed in a more in-depth, impactful and relevant manner to allow for a broader context analysis of the SENCO role in the Irish primary school setting.

3.2.2 Application to the current study and the SENCO role

Regarding the current study, the SENCO lies in the centre of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological framework, as this is the unit of analysis and research focus. It is important for the SENCO to be at the centre of the system as every interaction is analysed from this perspective. The microsystem is the closest level to the SENCO and it refers to the activities, roles and interpersonal relationships in the SENCO's work setting. The immediate setting of the SENCO, their classroom along with all other classrooms (including SET, special class and mainstream classrooms) and supports areas, such as sensory and therapy rooms, are located within their microsystem. Other factors that play an influential role within the SENCO's microsystem include contextual factors such as pupils, SETs, mainstream class teachers, special class teachers, SNAs, parents, school leadership personnel (Principal and SLT) and school policies and procedures.

The mesosystem, or 'microsystems combined' (Thomas 2011, p.57), 'comprises the interrelationships among two or more settings' in which the SENCO 'actively participates' (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p.25). For example, the SENCO may be a teacher within the microsystem of the SEN classroom in which they work whilst also linked to the microsystem of the school where they are aware of the practices of others within the SEN team and also mainstream classes. In addition, the SENCO may be a parent or relation or family friend of a child with SEN, and be a member of a group such as a study group or a community of practice in the area of SEN. In this scenario, the SENCO will be part of the microsystem of home life and their own social, educational or community of practices circles, whilst linked to the microsystem of the school life in the capacity of parent, relation or family friend, member of a practice group or professional learning group.

Regarding the mesosystem, Bronfenbrenner (1979) sets out four types of possible linkages between the microsystems, which are multisetting participation, indirect linkage, intersetting communications and intersetting knowledge. Multisetting participation is the most basic form of interconnection and 'occurs when the same

person engages in activities in more than one setting’ (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p.209). As an example, the SENCO would be part of two or more microsystems that include being a teacher in the school, being part of a family, being a parent/ family friend of a child with SEN or being part of a group of friends (Dobson and Douglas 2020). Indirect linkage is where the link between settings is through a third person. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.210) noted that ‘the same person does not actively participate in both settings’ and that the link is ‘through a third party who serves as an intermediate link between persons in the two settings’. For example, the administrator of a community of practice forum, such as a SENCO Forum or social media SEN/ SENCO group, is the intermediate link between different SENCOs’/ SETs’ individual school microsystem settings. Intersetting communications is the third potential linkage type and is where messages are ‘transmitted from one setting to the other with the express intent of providing specific information to persons in the other setting’ (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p.210). The communication, which can be one-sided or in both directions, can occur here in a variety of ways such as directly through face-to-face interactions, telephone communication, written correspondence or indirectly via ‘chains in the social networks’ (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p.210). An example for the SENCO can be within the school as they work within different microsystems within this setting, such as microsystem of the school, including potentially the school leadership team, and the microsystem of their SEN classes and mainstream classes. This intersetting communication between the SENCO reflecting on their own SET class microsystem and working with other SET class and mainstream class microsystems is an example of this intersetting linkage between various settings. In this case the SENCO through intersetting communication is aware of their own practice within their own SEN classroom and all other SET classes and mainstream classes and the wider practices within their own and other schools. Finally, the last potential linkage type, intersetting knowledge, ‘refers to information or experience that exists in one setting about the other’ (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p. 210). This knowledge may be obtained through a variety of means, such as intersetting communication or sources external to the particular setting (Bronfenbrenner 1979). For example, this could encompass interactions between external professional services, such as NEPS, NCSE advisors and SENOs and the school microsystem.

The exosystem refers to settings in which the SENCO is not directly involved and does not actively participate in but yet impacts on their own settings and microsystems and hence the enactment of their SENCO role. Examples of these settings that the SENCO is not directly involved in are national policies and legislations, e.g. EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland 2004), and Department of Education circulars, e.g. Circular 0013/2017 (SETAM) (DES 2017) and Circular 0002/2024 (DE 2024). According to Dobson and Douglas (2020), for the SENCO the exosystem could equate to factors, such as school decision-making processes, school policy, practice and procedures, that they have no influence over but yet these factors can impact upon the school organisation and effectiveness, which in turn can potentially affect the SENCO and his/ her role. Essentially the SENCOs become the enactors of policy stemming from the exosystem (Ball *et al.* 2012).

Next, the macrosystem is viewed as a societal blueprint and involves the cultural context, ideologies and beliefs surrounding the SENCO that can potentially influence the SENCO and their role, responsibilities and development. According to Anderson *et al.* (2014), within the school context the macrosystem incorporates political or national agendas and the resulting external systems that are imposed upon the schools. The schools and the SENCO have to function and operate within these systems that align with the national agendas, beliefs, ideologies and political vision. National systems, such as the political and education system, have the potential to influence policy in education including special education, which in turn can impact upon the SENCO's microsystems and their role (Long 2017). The macrosystem is also reflective of wider 'belief systems or ideology' (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p.26) and in turn wider international accords, such as the right of participation (Salamanca Agreement (UNESCO 1994) and Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN1989)) (Dobson and Douglas 2020). Another such accord is the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (United Nations 2006), which was ratified in Ireland in 2018. Such international accords can potentially impact on cultural beliefs and ideologies (macrosystem), which have a cascading effect throughout the framework impacting on national agendas, political decisions, education systems and procedures, SEN policies and procedure and ultimately on the SENCO's microsystems and their roles and responsibilities. In addition, Dobson and Douglas (2020, p.16) said that SENCOs are 'influenced by much wider factors both

within the school but on a national level’. For example, the revised SETAM circular (DE 2024) will again significantly impact the SENCO role as further changes to practice in schools are imminent. Potentially if the NCSE policy advice paper (2024) is progressively realised in a phased manner then the cascading impact on the roles and responsibilities of the SENCO role will be substantial.

The international discourse on inclusive and special education is another influencing factor within the macrosystem that impacts on cultural ideologies, attitudes and beliefs of the setting. Fitzgerald (2022, p.54) noted that inclusive and special education ‘occupy contested and highly politicised spaces’ internationally. Inclusive and special education are often viewed as binary concepts (Hornby 2020) and Florian (2019) indicated in the literature that special education is incompatible with inclusive education. Hornby (2015) has previously outlined that both inclusive and special education are interdependent, inter-related and complex and proposed an approach, namely ‘inclusive special education’ that considers the necessary co-existence of both philosophies and integrates both approaches into the education system. Such discourse, approaches and viewpoints will impact on the societal attitudes and cultural beliefs within the macrosystem, which will have a cascading impact on each level of the framework.

Finally, the chronosystem focuses on the passage of time and incorporates ‘the impact of events situated in time’ (Dobson and Douglas 2020, p. 301) on the development of the SENCO and their roles and responsibilities. This system refers to the timing of events and how these influence the SENCO’s development throughout both the school year and the SENCO’s career (Long 2017). Under consideration here are factors such as the length of teaching experience, length of SEN teaching experience and the length of SENCO experience on the development of the SENCO and their role and responsibilities. This system also refers to the impact of events in time, such as the issuance of SETAM, Circular 0013/2017 (DES 2017) on the SENCO role and responsibilities and its subsequent enactment. To summarise, in Table 3.1 a bioecological perspective on the SENCO role is provided with detail of the various factors residing within each level for the current study.

Table 3.1: A bioecological perspective of the SENCO role. Adapted from Long (2017).

Level	Detail regarding factors/ contributors residing within each level for the current study
Microsystems	SENCO Participation in professional learning (completion of PGSEN) Teaching experience in SEN and mainstream Post of responsibility Caseload Allocated time for role Attitude to Inclusion Leadership style Principal/ Board of Management SEN experience and qualification (Professional Learning) Attitude to inclusion Leadership style Special Education Teacher Professional Learning in SEN Teaching experience in SEN and mainstream Caseload Co-teaching Attitude to inclusion Evidence-based practice knowledge for teaching Class Teacher Teaching experience SEN experience and professional learning in SEN Expectations of the role of the SET and SENCO Attitude to inclusion School Attitudes to inclusion Collaborative practices Socio-economic status Inclusive policies and procedures Parents Personal attitude to inclusion Attitudes to education Knowledge and experience of supports available and SEN SNAs Professional learning Expertise in SEN Pupil Pupils' level of need Pupils' voice
Mesosystems	External Agency Supports NEPS- Educational Psychologists HSE – Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists NCSE - SENOs Linkages between SENCOs in Professional Learning Communities Sharing, consulting, collaborating between SENCOs from different settings Linkages between SENCOs and Third-Level Institutions SENCOs interacting with third-level institutions for professional learning Attitudes within the linking microsystems Attitude to inclusion Attitude to the role of the SENCO Attitude to Professional Learning
Exosystem	National policies and legislation EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland 2004) Circular 013/2017 (DES 2017a)

	Circular 0002/2024 (DE 2024) DEIS Action Plan 2017 (DES 2017c) LAOS: A quality framework for primary schools and special schools (DES 2016a, 2022) PGSEN (DES funded) Socio-economic factors such as recession, international conflicts.
Macrosystem	Societal attitudes to inclusion International Accords, e.g. Salamanca Agreement (UNESCO 1994) and Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989), UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UN 2006)
Chronosystem	Changes over time – passage of time resulting in changes in each level of the framework e.g., ill health, marriage, changes in the environment of the SENCO, national policy changes.

In addition, the key factors at each level of the Bronfenbrenner bioecological systems theory for the SENCO are also displayed in Figure 3.2. Traditionally the child has been at the centre of the system but in this study the SENCO is repositioned in the centre to permit an analysis of SENCO role and the interdependent and interconnected factors that influence and impact on the enactment of the role. By playing the SENCO in the centre it enables an examination of the SENCO role and of their interactions with significant others within the school setting and broader educational system. The SENCO is also played in the centre of the system as their ‘process management role’ and ‘strategic management role’ places ‘the SENCO at the centre of the school development process’ (Hallett and Hallett 2020, p.3).

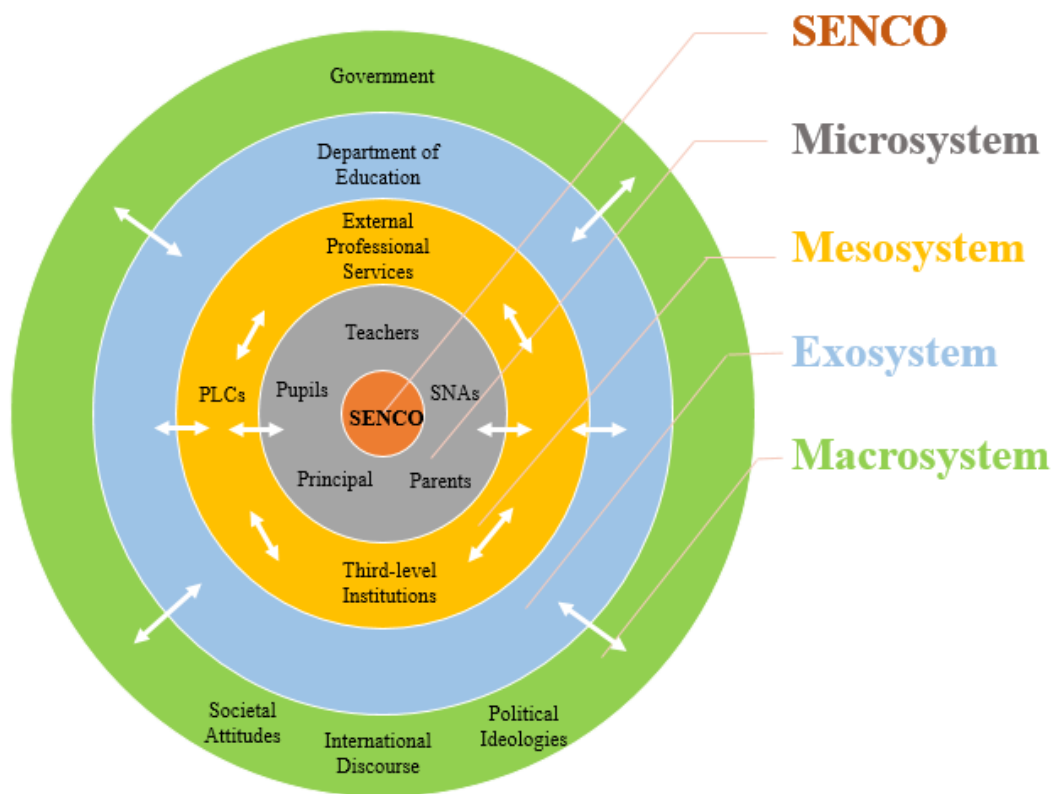


Figure 3.2: Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (adapted from Bronfenbrenner (2005)) applied to the SENCO role.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a theoretical framework, which was used as the guiding lens throughout the research process. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (2005) was selected as it provided a framework of nested and interconnected systems to identify, organise and understand the interaction of the factors influencing the SENCO role. The theory was used to structure the planning and implementing of the research and acted as a guiding lens during the analysis and discussion of the data that was derived from both phases of this research. The theory was used to support the theorising of the SENCO role with all its complexities and dilemmas as the SENCO role interacts in a complex environment. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological perspective allows for a broader analysis of the interconnecting factors, which influence the SENCO role. It is envisaged that the approach taken by utilising Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theory to research the SENCO role will provide a blueprint for further research in this area. It is also conceived that the research findings derived

through the application of this framework will enhance further planning for the SENCO role as well as professional learning needed to support the leadership for SEN provision within mainstream schools in Ireland. Bronfenbrenner's theory provided a framework and permitted a broader analysis of the various factors contributing to the leadership of SEN provision within the Irish primary education system.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

4.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview with the associated rationale for the methodological approaches that were utilised for this research. A mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018) was employed to deepen my understanding of the complexities surrounding the lived experiences of the SENCO role. The views of SENCOs and Principals were gathered regarding leadership and management for inclusive special education provision in mainstream primary schools. The philosophical underpinnings of the research and the researcher's positionality are outlined. Data collection procedures and the associated data analysis are detailed together with a discussion of key aspects related to the quality of the research. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical considerations and limitations relevant to this research.

4.1 Research Aims and Questions

The aim of the research was to explore Irish SENCOs' and Principals' perspectives on the role of the SENCO, identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for their professional learning. From a review of the literature the research questions were developed. Mertens (2019) indicates that the literature review serves as a foundation for the formation of research questions and the operationalisation of the objectives of the research programme. These questions align with the overall aim of this programme of work and address identified research needs and gaps regarding the role of the SENCO in the primary school setting.

Specifically, this research addressed the following research questions:

- What are the demographics and profile of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?
- What are the perceived enablers to enactment of the SENCO role?
- What are the perceived barriers to enactment of the SENCO role?

- What are the professional learning needs of SENCOs and supports needed to allow them to effectively enact their role?

4.2 Research Paradigm

The word paradigm was first used by Thomas Kuhn in 1962 to mean ‘a philosophical way of thinking’ (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, p.26). It can be considered a way of viewing the world and it can ‘guide and direct thinking and action’ (Mertens 2019, p.7). Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) refer to the term paradigm as the researcher’s ‘worldview’ and it can be viewed as a ‘lens through which the researcher looks at the world’ (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, p.26). It can be thought of as the viewpoint, school of thought, perspective, or set of shared beliefs, which in turn can inform the interpretation of research data (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). This conceptual lens is used by the researcher to examine the methodological aspects of the project and influences how the data is analysed (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). The selected paradigm has an impact on what should be studied, how the topic could be studied and how the results are interpreted (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). Ultimately, paradigms have an implication on the entire research decision-making process from research design/ methods to data analysis and interpretation. They tell us how we can construct meaning from the gathered data based on our individual experiences, namely where the researcher is ‘coming from’ (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, p.26). While categorising educational research into a number of paradigms is complex, four major paradigms have emerged, namely the positivism/ postpositivism, interpretivist/ constructivist, transformative and pragmatic paradigms (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017; Mertens 2019).

My thirteen years working as a special education teacher and my experience as a lecturer in inclusive and special education have provided me with lived experiences of the chosen research area. These experiences and my background have inherently influenced my thinking and philosophical approach to research in inclusive and special education. This study was an interpretative study seeking to explore SENCOs’ and Principals’ perceptions of the SENCO role through a mixed-methods approach. It aimed to explore SENCOs’ and Principals’ personal opinions, attitudes, and lived experiences of the SENCO role. The focus was on understanding the

participants' subjective and personal viewpoints regarding the role from their varied lived experiences of engaging with the realities in their educational contexts.

Having reflected upon the philosophical underpinnings of this research and examined the principal paradigms, I came to the decision to frame this research within the interpretivist paradigm. Guba and Lincoln (1989) note that the central aspect of this paradigm is to subjectively understand human experience. According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017, p.33) the interpretivist paradigm makes an effort 'to get into the head of the subjects being studied' and to understand the subjects' meaning and thinking of their context. The focus is placed on the individual and their interpretation of the world around them (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). The central assumption guiding this paradigm is that knowledge is 'socially constructed' (Mertens 2019) and that meaning is derived from 'our engagement with the realities of the world' (Crotty 1998, p. 8). Hence this paradigm is sometimes referred to as the constructivist paradigm, where theory is grounded in the data derived from the research process (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). As this research project centred on studying SENCOs' and Principals' lived experiences of their realities I was of the opinion that an interpretive framework was appropriate.

The interpretivist paradigm 'assumes a subjectivist epistemology, a relativist ontology, and a naturalist methodology' (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, p.33). A subjectivist epistemology implies that the researcher makes meaning of the participants' data and will socially construct knowledge as a result of their interactions with the participants and personal experiences of the real-life settings of the study (Punch 2005; Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). Within this paradigm, research is a 'product of the values of the researcher and cannot be independent of them' (Mertens 2019, p.16). A relativist ontology refers to the belief that there are multiple realities to the studied situation and that meaning is made of those realities through the researcher and participant interactions (Chalmers *et al.* 2005). With this paradigm the belief is that context is vital for knowledge and knowing and that there is an inevitable interaction between both the researcher and the participants (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). As this study involves the interpretive construction of knowledge with me the researcher, who is also a special education teacher, embedded within the research process, the selection of this paradigm is justified. It is important for the researcher to hold the values attributing to ethics when undertaking this research. Axiology refers

to ethical issues that need to be considered when conducting research, concepts of right and wrong behaviour relating to the research, as well as the value we attribute to the ‘different aspects of the research, the participants, the data and the audience’ (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, p.28). In this research, axiology related to placing value on the participants’ contribution and on respecting their level of experience. This study was planned and implemented in a manner where respect for the participants’ experience and opinions was shown and I was always mindful that ethical issues were addressed in this study. I was guided by values such as respect, trust, fairness, empathy and professionalism when conducting this research project. In addition, I managed my own bias as a SET throughout the research process thus ensuring the results were an accurate reflection of the participants’ contribution, experience and opinions.

As this study adopted a mixed-methods design utilising both qualitative and quantitative approaches, a positivist paradigm, which advocates the use of quantitative methods, was considered. This paradigm includes the belief that we can study the social world in the same way as the natural world (Mertens 2019). A positivist approach centres on a process of experimentation and observation and employs precise and accurate scientific approaches to derive conclusions (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). The epistemology for this paradigm is objectivist which implies a precise approach without bias where personal or subjective thoughts and ideas are eliminated (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). As this paradigm has an assumption that there is a method ‘for studying the social world that is value-free’, it is inadequate when used with research related to human behaviour (Mertens 2019, p.10). As a result, I eliminated this paradigm as the guiding framework for my research.

The interpretivist paradigm advocates a naturalist methodology, which relies on data gathered via interviews, discourse, text messages and reflective sessions where the researcher acts as a participant observer (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). Interviews, observations and document reviews are central in this paradigm (Mertens 2019). A mixed-methods approach was selected for this research with a combination of sequential quantitative (Phase One) and qualitative (Phase Two) phases. The semi-structured interviews used within Phase Two are reflective of the interpretive approach. More weight was placed on this phase compared to Phase One and the interviews garnered rich data allowing for in-depth analysis of the SENCOS’ and Principals’ lived experiences. This approach to data collection within Phase Two

allowed for a more personal interactive mode of data collection where myself and the participants were interlocked in this interactive process (Mertens 2019). Phase One of this research utilised a survey-based approach including both open and closed questions. This may seem in opposition to the interpretivist paradigm as surveys are largely utilised within a positivist framework (Robson 2002; Kivunja and Kuyini 2017; Mertens 2019). However, Romm (2013) justifies the use of surveys in terms of an interpretivist/ constructivist stance and indicates that they can provide insight into participants' 'biographical information, their social positioning, their behaviour (as they recall it) and their opinions/ attitudes and views' (Romm 2013, p.664). In this research, the surveys used in Phase One were important as there is limited, if any, research of this type in the Irish primary school setting and they allowed for the capturing of the context and breadth of experiences of SENCOs. Participant responses should then be complemented by the 'exploration of meaning via alternative methods' (Romm 2013, p.664). This viewpoint was mirrored in this research where the results from the survey used in Phase One informed Phase Two and the design of the semi-structured interview schedule. Phase One provided detail on 'what' was involved in the SENCO role, while Phase Two explored the 'why' and 'how' questions regarding the key outcomes from Phase One. In support of my use of a survey in Phase One within the interpretivist paradigm, Lincoln and Guba (2003) refer to the use of multiple ways of viewing any 'observed' patterns. Lincoln and Guba (2003, p.274) indicate that there is 'no royal road to ultimate knowledge' and that alternative 'roads' may employ both quantitative and qualitative methods with the 'primary focus still being on developing context-grounded interpretations of social life' (Romm 2013, p.656). Finally, Johnson *et al.* (2007, p.124) refer to assigning 'dominant status' within mixed method designs to qualitative methods while it is 'concurrently recognized that the addition of quantitative data and approaches are likely to benefit most research projects'. This aligns with Burton and Bartlett (2009) who indicate any approach to answer the research question is appropriate as they all contribute to a greater understanding of the study area. Based on these viewpoints I felt that the adoption of an interpretivist approach with the mixed-methods design used within this research was appropriate and allowed for the social construction of knowledge through the research process.

4.3 Research Methodology

A mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was used in this research (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018), which received ethical approval on 6th of October 2022 (Appendix 1) This design consists of two distinct phases, namely quantitative followed by qualitative, where the qualitative data serves to explain and elaborate on the quantitative results obtained in the first phase (Ivankova *et al.* 2006; Crewsell and Plano Clark 2018). Essentially the second phase builds on the first phase, with the quantitative data providing a general understanding of the research problem and the qualitative data refine and explain these results by exploring participants' views in greater depth (Ivankova *et al.* 2006). A visual depiction of this design is illustrated in Figure 4.1.

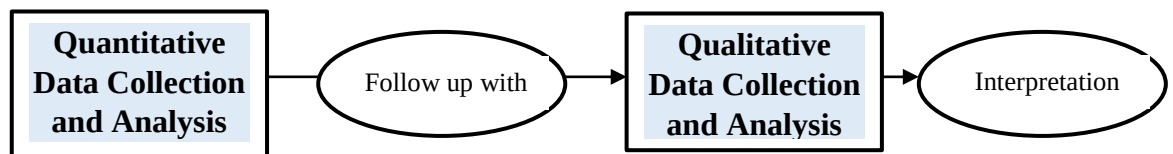


Figure 4.1: Mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Adapted from Creswell and Plano Clark (2018, p.66)).

The focus of this research was to engage with, explore and interpret the role of the SENCO through the lived experiences of the SENCOs and Principals. The paradigm and associated ontology and epistemology that lends itself to this research, namely the interpretivist paradigm, has influenced the choice of methodology. Crotty (1998, p.3) noted that ‘methodology is the strategy, plan of action, process, or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice of methods to the desired outcomes’.

A mixed-methods approach is defined by Johnson *et al.* (2007, p.123) as:

... the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration.

With this design, Johnson *et al.* (2007) refer to a qualitative-quantitative continuum, which incorporates overlapping groups and types of mixed-methods researchers (Figure 4.2).

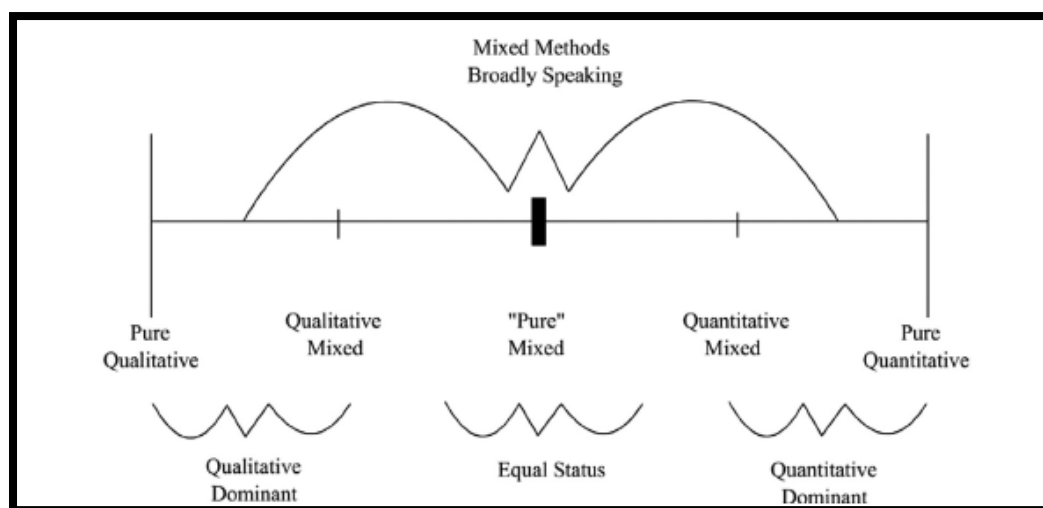


Figure 4.2: Mixed-methods research qualitative-quantitative continuum (Adapted from Johnson *et al.* (2007, p.124)).

The area to the left of this continuum is labelled as ‘qualitative dominant’ mixed-methods research and is symbolised as QUAL +quan research (Johnson *et al.* 2007). This aspect of the continuum fits as an appropriate design for this research programme as it advocates the incorporation of quantitative data into an otherwise qualitative project. It also aligns with the interpretivist/ constructivist paradigm that frames this project. An apt definition of this research is provided by Johnson *et al.* (2007, p.124):

Qualitative dominant mixed-methods research is the type of mixed research in which one relies on a qualitative, constructivist-poststructuralist-critical view of the research process, while concurrently recognizing that the addition of quantitative data and approaches are likely to benefit most research projects.

The design for this research programme followed the approach outlined above and included two phases/ studies. As the overall dominance in the research was qualitative, the overall mixed methods design for the study was QUAL +quan. Phase One involved the use of a survey-design within the study aimed at gathering contextual information on the SENCO role and to inform the themes for Phase Two. For this phase a ‘quantitative dominant’ mixed-methods design was used (left hand side of Figure 4.1, QUAN +qual) with qualitative (open questions) and quantitative (closed

questions) strands. Phase Two of this research programme stemmed from Phase One and adopted a qualitative approach to gain in-depth and rich insights into the SENCO role through the lived experiences of both SENCOs and Principals. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the qualitative data collection instrument for this phase. Figure 4.3 outlines a summary of the methodological approach for this research programme.

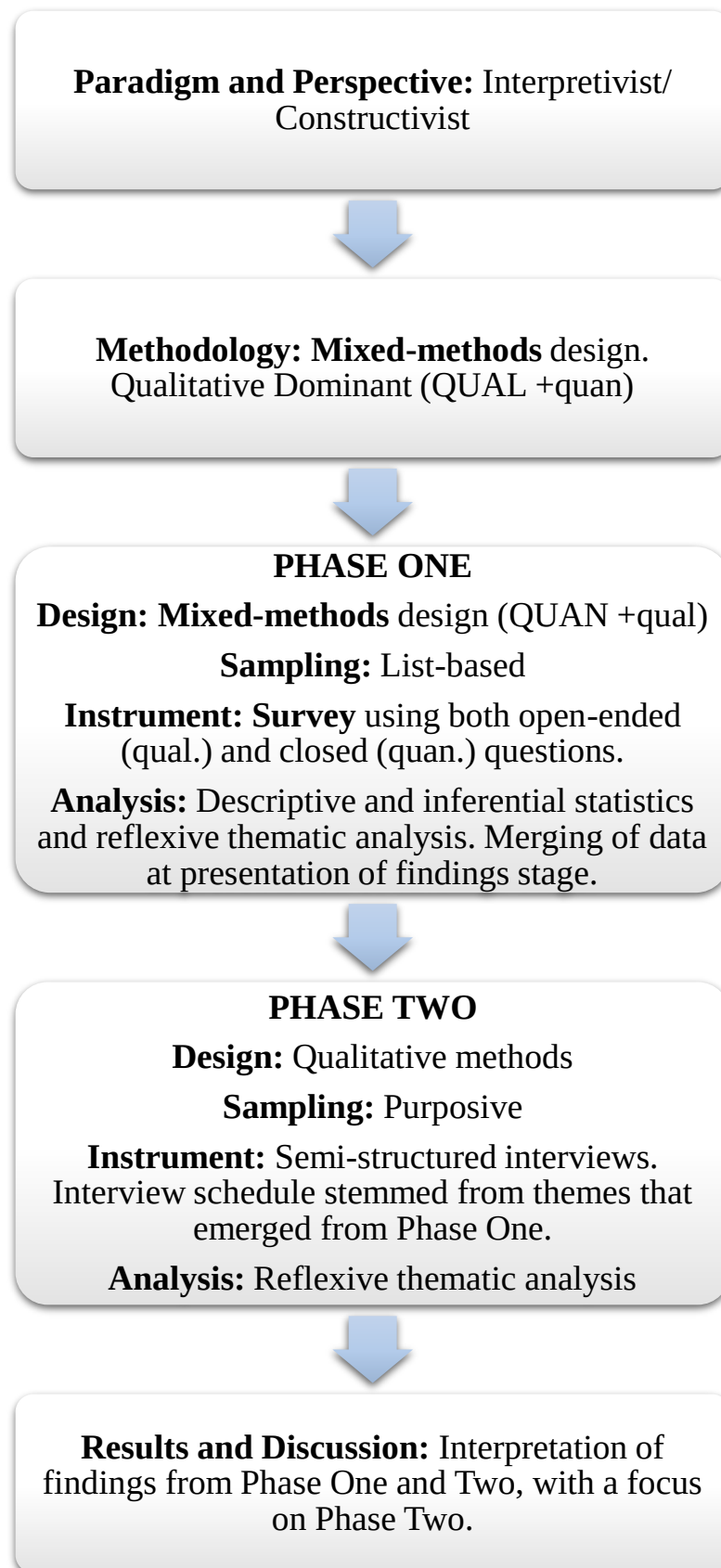


Figure 4.3: Summary of methodological framework.

4.4 Sampling Strategy

In the sections below detail is provided on the sampling for both Phase One and Phase Two. The sample for Phase One came from the SENCO population in the Irish mainstream primary school setting and for Phase Two the sample came from three school population cohorts, i.e. SENCOs (who were also SETs), Principals who were SENCOs (SENCO Principals) and non-SENCO Principals (referred to as Principals from hereon). The Principals' perspective on the role of the SENCO is lacking in many studies and therefore there was a need to include this cohort in the sample.

4.4.1 Phase One sampling

In this phase, list-based sampling was used where all units of the sampling frame were invited to participate in order to maximise the sample size ($n = 3,104$). All primary schools were contacted by email using the database on the Department of Education website (DE 2021). The target sample size from the SENCO population was determined using the Qualtrics (2022) sample size calculator with a 95% confidence interval and 5% margin of error. There are 3,104 primary schools in Ireland (DE 2021) and the associated sample size, assuming a 95% confidence interval and 5% margin of error, was 342 SENCOs. This confidence interval and margin of error was used previously in similar research by O'Gorman and Drudy (2011).

In addition to the sampling approach described above, social media channels and professional networks were used to further promote the survey and boost participation. Consequently, invitations to participate, were sent to Local SENCO forums (professional learning networks) and SENCO social media groups. The survey link and invitation to participate was also shared on social media platforms, such as X formerly known as Twitter.

4.4.2 Phase Two sampling

In Phase Two, population groups were selected, namely SENCOs, SENCO Principals and Principals. Purposive sampling was used to identify the participants. The selected interpretive paradigm for this research guided the selection of this sampling approach

for Phase Two as it allowed me, the researcher, to select samples with the goal of identifying information-rich cases thus allowing in-depth analysis (Mertens 2019). The sample selection involved some element of stratified purposeful sampling (Mertens 2019) in that participants were chosen based on variation regarding school type, composition, size, DEIS status, language of instruction and geographic location. Stratified purposeful sampling is a combination of strategies so that subgroups are selected based on specified criteria (Mertens 2019). As recommended by Bryman (2016), variances should exist between participants of the sample so that a comprehensive range of viewpoints and experiences can be captured.

4.5 Participant Details

4.5.1 Phase One

In total, 371 SENCOs completed the survey, which represents 371 mainstream primary schools across Ireland. This sample was above the target sample size of 342 SENCOs, and represents SENCOs from various school contexts, which includes school type, location, size, catchment area, and DEIS status. It was estimated that the sample in this study represents approximately 90,680 primary pupils. There was variation in this sample with SENCOs represented from different school types, school sizes, catchment areas, and DEIS status. In total 78.4% of the schools were denominational national schools (e.g. Catholic ethos primary schools), 6.8% were community national schools (i.e. multid denominational national school), 7.8% were Educate Together schools (i.e. co-educational state funded schools where all religions are treated equally), 6.8% were Gaelscoil (i.e. national schools that operate through the Irish language) and the remaining 0.2% were private schools. The majority of the schools were mixed sex schools (89.8%), while both boys only and girls only equating to 5.1% each. Regarding type of classes in the schools, 58.2% had mainstream classes only and the remaining 41.8% (155 schools) had both mainstream and special classes. Of these 155 schools, 31.6% has 1 special class, 47.1% had 2 classes, 13.6% had 3 classes, 3.9% had 4 classes and the remaining 3.9% had 5 special classes. Most schools did not have Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) status (66.3%). DEIS is an integrated approach by the Department of Education to the issue of educational inclusion and ‘was designed to give tailored support to schools who have

a high concentration of disadvantage’ (DES 2017c, p.4). Of the 125 SENCOs (33.7%) who indicated that their school had DEIS status, 54.4% were DEIS Urban Band 1, 20% were DEIS Urban Band 2 and 25.6% were DEIS Rural Band. The DEIS status is awarded to qualifying schools in line with the Department of Education DEIS plan 2017, which sets out the department’s vision ‘for education to more fully become a proven pathway to better opportunities for those in communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion’ (DES 2017c, p.6). Regarding school catchment area, 30.2% were urban (city/suburbs) schools, 22.1% were urban (town) schools, 19.1% were urban and rural mixed (e.g. town and surrounding countryside) schools and 28.6% were rural schools. Finally, Table 4.1 provides details on the number of pupils attending the schools.

Table 4.1: Number of pupils attending the schools as indicated by the participating SENCOs.

Pupil Number	Under 100	100-200	200-300	300-400	Over 400
Percentage of Schools	15.4%	23.7%	23.5%	15.1%	22.4%

Of the 371 SENCO respondents, 91.6% were female and 8.4% were male. The majority of these SENCOs had over 21 years’ teaching experience (54.5%) and had 5 or less years’ experience as a SENCO (65.5%). For detailed results on the SENCOs’ experience, qualifications, post of responsibility (PoR) status and role refer to Chapter 5, Section 5.3.

4.5.2 Phase Two

In total, there were nine participants in Phase Two, with three each from the SENCO, SENCO Principal and Principal cohorts. In Table 4.2, details pertaining to the participants are outlined. Specifically, detail is provided on the participants’ experience, qualifications, SEN qualifications and post of responsibilities. All participants had substantial teaching experience and the SENCOs’ and SENCO Principals’ SET experience ranged from 2 to 12 years. All SENCOs and SENCO Principals had somewhat limited SENCO experience, which was also evident in Phase One, and could be due to the emerging nature of the role. The participating SENCOs

and SENCO Principals all had post of responsibilities related to SEN and three (50%) had postgraduate qualifications specific to SEN. These post of responsibilities included Principal posts (senior leadership posts) and Assistant Principal 1 (AP1) and Assistant Principal 2 (AP2) posts, both of which can be viewed as formal middle leadership posts.

Table 4.2: Details of participants pertaining to experience, qualifications and post of responsibilities.

Participant	Role	Gender	Years Teaching Experience	Years SET Experience	Years SENCO &/or Principal Experience	SEN Specific Qualifications	Other Postgraduate Qualifications	Post of Responsibility related to SEN
S1	SET & SENCO	Female	35	11	3yrs SENCO	Postgraduate Diploma in SEN	N/A	AP1 (SENCO)
S2	SET & SENCO	Female	22	2	2yrs SENCO	None	Master's in Education.	AP1 (SENCO, English & RSE)
S3	SET & SENCO	Female	16	12	7yrs SENCO	None	N/A	AP2 (SENCO & Wellbeing)
SP1	SENCO Principal	Female	22	3	3yrs SENCO, 3yrs Principal	Postgraduate Diploma in Autism	N/A	Principal
SP2	SENCO Principal	Male	11	7	1.5yrs SENCO, 1yr Principal	None	Master's in Leadership	Principal (Acting)
SP3	SENCO Principal	Female	31	5	3yrs SENCO, 13yrs Principal	Master's in SEN	PhD in area of DEIS	Principal
P1	Principal	Female	22	0.33 (1 term)	4yrs Principal	None	PhD in Education Leadership	N/A
P2	Principal	Male	24	None	7yrs Principal	None	N/A	N/A
P3	Principal	Male	38	None	32yrs Principal	None	N/A	N/A

AP1: Assistant Principal 1; AP2: Assistant Principal 2 ; P : Principal ; S: SENCO ; SP: SENCO Principal

Information related to the participants' schools is documented in Table 4.3. This relates to information such as DEIS status, percentage of pupils receiving SEN supports, and staff numbers. Three of the schools (33%) were DEIS schools and there was variance regarding school size, percentage of pupils receiving SEN supports and the number of SET and SNA staff. Four schools had special classes and two schools, which were DEIS, had home-school liaison officers. The DEIS schools had some of the highest percentage of pupils receiving support with School E having 35.3% of pupils and School A having 31.2%. Both of these schools had the highest number of SET and SNA staff. Overall, there was variance across the sample of schools.

Table 4.3: Details of the participants' schools.

Participant & School	DEIS Status	Number of Pupils	Number receiving SEN supports	Percentage receiving SEN support	Number of SETs	Number of SNAs	Number of Home School Liaison Officers	Number of Special Classes
S1, School A	DEIS Urban Band 2	642	200	31.2%	9 Full-time, 1 shared (20 hours) and 1 Part-time EAL* (10 hours)	5 Full-time, 1 Part-time (20 hours)	1	0
S2, School B	N/A	488	100	20.5%	5 Full-time, 1 Part-time (0.8 post)	6 Full-time, 1 Part-time (0.5 post)	0	0
S3, School C	N/A	330	80	24.3%	4 Full-time, 1 Part-time (0.5) and 1 Part-time EAL* (10 hours)	2 Full-time, 1 Part-time (0.5 hours)	0	0
SP1, School D	DEIS Rural	190	50	26.3%	3 Full-time and 1 Part-time (0.5 post)	6	0	2
SP2, School E	DEIS Urban Band 1	176	62	35.3%	11 Full-time	8	1	3
SP3, School F	N/A	297	30	10%	3 Full-time and 1 Part-time* (20 hours)	5	0	2
P1, School G	N/A	524	162	30.9%	7 Full-time, 1 Part-time (0.5 post)	12	0	1
P2, School H	N/A	479	145	30.3%	8 Full-time	5 Full-time and 1 Part-time (infant day)	0	0
P3, School I	N/A	594	60	10.1%	11 Full-time	5 Full-time	0	0

*Hours due to enrolment of Ukrainian children; EAL: English as an Additional Language.

4.6 Data Collection: Instruments, Piloting and Administration

The mixed-methods research design in this research involved the use of multiple sources of data collection. Teddie and Tashakkori (2010, p.8) detailed that a mixed method methodology integrates ‘the most appropriate techniques of a myriad of QUAL, QUAN, and mixed-methods to more thoroughly investigate a phenomenon of interest’. The selected mixed-methods approach in this research sought to use multiple methods to explore alternative perspectives and multiple realities of the phenomenon (Merten 2019). This aligns with the interpretivist paradigm that has been adopted for this research. The data collection instruments for both phases of this research are outlined in the following sections. As indicated in previous sections, Phase One involved the use of a survey and Phase Two utilised semi-structured interviews to attain a more refined and in-depth understanding of the realities of the SENCO role.

4.6.1 Phase One data collection

4.6.1.1 Survey design

Research indicates that surveys collect self-reported data on attitudes, beliefs and demographic information related to a central phenomenon (Teddie and Tashakkori, 2010). The objectives of Phase One were to collect data on the SENCOs’ demographics and profile, roles and responsibilities in schools, the enablers and barriers to SENCO role enactment, and the SENCOs’ professional learning needs. It also aimed to identify key themes related to the SENCO role for further exploratory research in Phase Two. Romm (2013) defined surveys as a method of obtaining information about the variables under consideration or the relationship between these variables. Mertens (2019, p.184) indicates that surveys are a method ‘used for descriptive research or as data collection methods used within other research designs’. Computer based surveys administered via multiple ways, e.g. email, X, and social media, have numerous advantages such as lower costs, convenience in accessing samples, quicker responses, more interactive formats, automated data collection and reporting, and access to larger samples. Multiple methods of administration are also advantageous as they can enhance response rates (Mertens 2019). The current phase

utilised a technologically delivered survey using Qualtrics (Provo, UT) designed to address the objectives of this phase.

The survey consisted of five main sections, which were based on the research questions, which stemmed from the literature review (Appendix 2 for survey). The design, particularly with regard to certain questions was influenced, with permission, by previous research that had used a similar survey design, e.g. namely O’Gorman and Drudy (2011), Fitzgerald (2015) and Holland and Fitzgerald (2023). It is recommended to use pre-designed surveys from previous studies (De Vaus 1996 cited in Winwood 2013). The survey was structured using closed, open and semi-closed questions. In the closed questions the participant selects a pre-determined response which has been pre-set by the researcher (Cohen *et al.* 2007; Creswell 2012; Mertens 2019). These possible responses were either in the form of a multiple-choice option, a 1-5 rating scale or yes/no questions (Mertens 2019). Two main open questions related to the enablers and barriers to SENCO role enactment were included and these allowed respondents to freely answer in their own words (Mertens 2019) without the boundaries of suggested responses (Cohen *et al.* 2007). Semi-closed questions were used in tandem with certain closed questions and involved an open-ended option, i.e. the use of other. The details of each section are detailed in the following paragraphs.

The first section (*General School Context*) included questions related to the school context and the questions were mainly closed questions, which elicited information on the demographics of the school. Questions incorporated in this section sought detail, for example, on school type, size, location, catchment area and DEIS status.

Section Two (*SEN Staff and SEN Provision*) included predominantly closed questions in relation to the SEN provision in the school. Questions in this section aimed to gather information on, for example, numbers of SEN staff, SEN team configuration, allocation of hours and resources, types of SEN provision and the SEN policies and procedures.

Section Three (*You and YOUR role as a SENCO*) included questions related to SENCO demographics and the SENCOs’ lived experiences of their roles and responsibilities. This section had a mix of closed and open questions. The open questions allowed the participants to provide information on their personal and

contextual experiences of facilitators and barriers influencing their role enactment. These more challenging questions were placed in the middle of the survey as advised by Robson (2002) as by this stage the participants would be at ease with the survey and the format due to the completion of straight forward factual-based questions at the beginning.

In Section Four (*Working with the Senior Leadership Team*) information was sought in relation to the SENCOs' experience of working with and in his/her school's Senior Leadership Team. This section sought to gather information on the extent that SENCOs lead and coordinate the strategic planning of school wide inclusive approaches.

The last section (*Professional Learning*) gathered data regarding the professional development experiences of SENCOs and their professional learning needs. Questions in this section related to the composition of a possible professional programme for SENCOs and the optimum delivery mode of such a programme.

4.6.1.2 Piloting of the survey

Once the survey was developed it was piloted with three participants who were practicing SENCOs in primary schools with similar characteristics to the proposed participants (Creswell 2012; Mertens 2019) (Appendix 3: cover email; Appendix 4: Information Sheet; Appendix 5: Informed Consent Form). I also sought advice from a 'critical friend' in my institution who was an expert in the research area and they provided targeted feedback on the overall survey design. This survey was piloted to 'fine-tune' the design, content and the technological process (Qualtrics) involved in the collection and analysis of the data (Robson 2011). Piloting helped to enhance alignment between the researcher's and participants' understanding of what the questions were asking, thus maximising the validity of the survey (Mertens, 2019).

In conducting this pilot, the steps outlined below from Mertens (2019, p.204) were followed.

- Select a pilot sample similar to you target population;
- Format the survey to allow for room for comments to be provided;

- Inform the participants that you are interested in their reactions to the process and questions and encourage them to note any ambiguities or response options that are not included;
- Follow the procedures for administration that you plan to use for your study; and
- Once the data is collected read the comments, check the responses item by item, do a brief analysis, and add, change, or delete any questions as needed.

In line with these recommendations, a word version of the survey was sent to all three participants to allow them to insert comments. In addition, the survey Qualtrics link was distributed to allow the participants to complete the survey in the same format that was planned for Phase One. Once the participants completed the survey and sent back comments, I read these comments, checked the responses and modified the survey accordingly. The feedback from this pilot phase was constructive, comprehensive and positive. One of the pilot participants commented that they ‘found the Qualtrics survey super easy to understand, navigate and fill in’. The participants suggested some ‘tweaking’ of the questions to enhance the clarity of the questions and to ensure that they related to the aims and purposes of the survey and to the different school settings. Some examples of changes that were made are as follows:

- The number of ranking questions was reduced because these questions were time-consuming and somewhat ambiguous. These questions were simplified to have a Yes/ No format.
- Some options for closed questions were modified to reflect the different school settings, e.g. ‘community national school’ was added as an option to the school type question.
- The number of open questions was reduced where possible and options were provided. For example, instead of asking the participants to insert the number of pupils in their schools in an open box, option ranges were provided, such as 0-100, 100-200 etc.
- Questions that were duplicates or not relevant for the aim and purpose of the survey were removed.
- The wording of certain questions was simplified to enhance understanding and thus reduce the time needed to complete the survey.

- The format of some questions was altered so that the key aspect of the questions was put in ‘bold’.

The participants also noted the length of time that it took them to complete the survey and they reported that it took between 20-25 minutes. In order to maintain focus in completing the survey signposts were included in the Qualtrics link, for example after Section Two participants saw the notice ‘Over half-way’ and before the last section the message ‘Last section. Thank you’ was included. There was also a percentage progress bar displayed on each page of the survey.

After the modifications suggested by the pilot participants were made to the Qualtrics link the researcher completed the survey multiple times to ensure that there were no ‘bugs’, ‘errors’ or ‘issues’ with the procedure or the online electronic link. These trial responses were all deleted prior to distribution of the survey to the Phase One participants.

4.6.1.3 Administering the survey

The survey and associated cover email (Appendix 6), information sheet (Appendix 7) and informed consent form (Appendix 8) were sent by email to all mainstream primary schools in Ireland on 21st of November 2022. This number was 3,104 as per the database on the Department of Education website (DE 2021). Reminder emails were also sent to this list on both the 13th of December 2022 and on the 10th of January 2023. This email correspondence invited the SENCO, i.e. person responsible for SEN provision, in the school to complete the survey. Only one response from each school was requested.

Social media platforms were used to distribute the survey. An invitation to participate was shared on X, formerly Twitter, and relevant organisations and associations were tagged into the posts such as the Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA), SENCO Forums, PDST, Teaching Council and the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO). In addition, the invitation to complete the survey was shared on a ‘Special Education Teachers Supporting Each Other’ Facebook page (Appendix 9). Finally, I presented my research work and shared the invitation to participate in this phase of the research with Local SENCO primary school Forums from Limerick,

Kerry and Clare (Appendix 10). In total, the survey was open and online on Qualtrics for a period of approximately 9 weeks.

4.6.2 Phase Two data collection

4.6.2.1 Interviews

Qualitative researchers commonly use interviews and according to Brenner (2006) interviewing is a staple of qualitative research. Hesse-Bieber (2017) identified a continuum of interview types (formal to informal) with varying degrees of structure. Interviews are valuable for collecting information, which cannot be reached or are inaccessible to other research tools, such as surveys and observations (Rose and Grosvenor 2001). They insist that interviews have the potential to gather valuable insight into peoples' lived experiences, opinions, attitudes and aspirations, which was the purpose of Phase Two of this research. According to Mertens (2019), an advantage to using the interview approach is that you get a full range and depth of information so that you fully understand the participants' experiences. There are two terms in relation to interviews that align with the purpose of this research. The first being that an interview is a 'guided conversation' (Yin 2009, p.106) and secondly that an interview is 'a conversation with a purpose' (Kvale 2006, p.483). Interviews can be done in person or via electronic means, individually or in groups (Savin-Baden and Tomb 2017). One-to-one interviews were conducted with the participants in this phase as these types of interviews are suitable when the participants have the ability to discuss and share their opinions (Creswell 2012).

There are three approaches to interviews that exist, namely structured, unstructured and semi-structured (Kvale and Brinkman 2009). At the beginning of the interview process a decision was made as to which interview structure approach was going to be used, having considered to what was appropriate to the research context. The rationale for this choice of data collection tool was based on the decision that it could yield in-depth information from the context of practice, which was necessary to answer the research questions. The semi-structured interview was chosen as the main data collection tool. This approach to interviewing seeks to understand the world from the participants' standpoint, which unfolds the meaning of their experiences and uncovers their lived experiences and world to scientific explanations (Kvale and

Brinkmann 2009). Comparative analysis within and across schools was also facilitated with the use of semi-structured interviews (Yin 2014) as similar questions were asked in each school. As Denzin (1989) notes, researchers undertaking a comparative analysis of responses to questions asked, need to ensure that potential differences in responses are due to differences in participants and not in the questions asked. Semi-structured interviews allow for probing. Probing in an effective manner is an important skill for an interviewer. A ‘practised interviewer’ will use detailed probes such as specific questions to clarify and extend meaning (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). For example, when participants were answering the question related to the need for a SENCO specific third-level postgraduate programme, probing questions were used to elicit greater detail from the participants on how such a programme should be constructed and delivered.

The actual interviews and how the interviews are conducted requires planning. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) present seven stages of the research process regarding interviews:

1. The interview project;
2. Designing;
3. Interviewing;
4. Transcribing;
5. Analysing;
6. Verifying; and
7. Reporting.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) insist that an interview topic should be conceptualised in advance of the interview and that the entire process, working through the seven stages, should be planned before engaging in the overall process, which was the case in this research.

4.6.2.2 Developing the interview schedule

Various steps were implemented with regard to the interview schedules. These steps are illustrated in Figure 4.4.

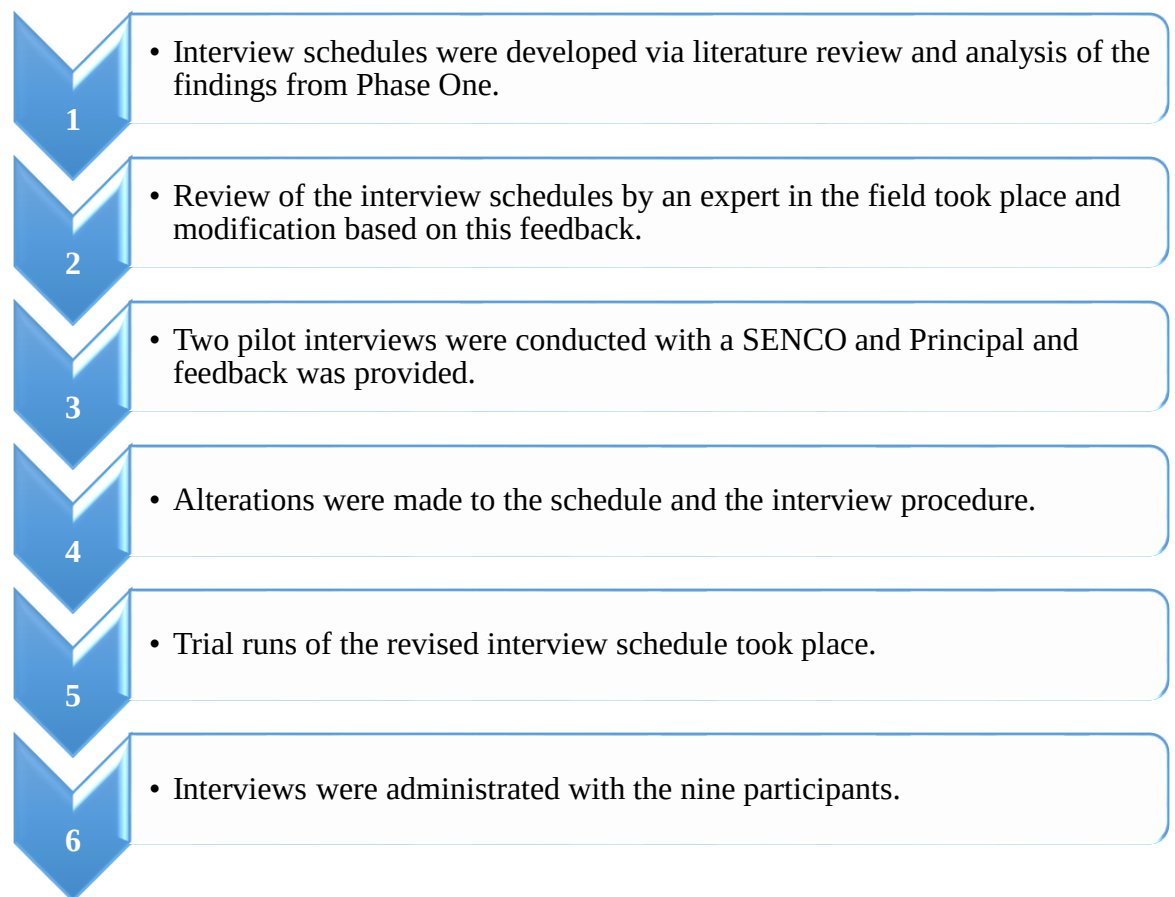


Figure 4.4: Flowchart showing the process involved with the Phase Two data collection.

Initially in this research an interview schedule was formulated, which was based on the topics related to the research questions and it included general and open questions (Bryman 2004). Key topics were also formulated and were influenced by the findings of the survey in Phase One of this research, which assisted in the design of the interview schedules. For specific detail on how Phase One influenced the development of the interview schedules refer to Section 5.7 of Chapter 5. For example, the key enablers and barriers for SENCO role enactment from Phase One were highlighted to the participants in the interviews and they were asked if they experienced these and if so to provide context regarding these enablers and barriers. Two schedules were developed, namely a SENCO schedule and Principal (non-SENCO) schedule (Appendix 11). The SENCO schedule was used for SENCOs and those Principals who were also SENCOs (SENCO Principals). There were two slight modifications to the schedule for the SENCO Principals. Firstly the SENCO Principals were not asked the question related to the SENCO working with the SLT (Question

22 of SENCO schedule), as these SENCOs were part of the SLT and thus this position would have potentially biased their answer to this question. Secondly, the SENCO Principals were not asked Question 23, which asked if they were comfortable having a leadership role within the school. They were not asked this out of respect for their position as a Principal. The areas/ topics included in the schedules together with sample questions are outlined in Table 4.4 and 4.5 below. Once the interview schedule was developed it was reviewed by an expert in the field who provided feedback. Based on the expert feedback some questions were rephrased to ensure that there was no ambiguity and the order of some questions was altered to enhance the flow of the interview. The expert also recommended to view the interviews as ‘guided conversations’ (Yin 2009) and avoid being over prescriptive with the schedule in order to put the interviewees at ease. The schedule was then altered before piloting took place.

Table 4.4: SENCO (SENCO and SENCO Principal) interview schedule overview.

Interview Schedule Topics	Sample Questions
General	• Tell me about your teaching experience? • How many years’ experience do you have as a SENCO?
School Context and SEN Provision	• Tell me about the ethos of the school- Is there an inclusive ethos? How is this evident? • Do you think there are any challenges to including pupils with SEN in your school? • In the last few years, the new model of resource allocation has brought about many changes. What has been the impact on practice in your school in light of these policy changes?
SENCO Role and Responsibilities	• Tell me about your role as SENCO. What do you do? Do you hold a post of responsibility? Tell me about that post? How many years do you have the post? • Are there other duties you think you should have, or are there responsibilities that you have that you feel you should not have? • How do others in the school view your role?

Working with the Senior Leadership Team	• Would you consider yourself to be a leader of SEN in your school? Why? Why not? • In your opinion can you tell me what leadership in SEN looks like? To what extent do you as SENCO lead and coordinate the strategic planning of SEN provision in your school?
SENCO Professional Learning	• In your opinion, to what extent is in-service education effective in supporting you in your role as SENCO? • The survey found that 39% of SENCOs are part of a Community of Practice. Are you a member of a Community of Practice or have you attended any gatherings of either SENCOs or SET teachers? If so have you found it beneficial and why? • What are the professional learning needs of SENCOs to allow them to effectively enact their role?
Staff Professional Learning	• Is in-service education in the area of special education readily available and easy to access for all staff? • How are staff supported to pursue in-service education in this area?
Conclusion	• If you could make a recommendation to the Minister for Education about the SENCO role, what would you say?

Table 4.5: Principal (Non-SENCO) interview schedule overview.

Interview Schedule Topics	Sample Questions
General	• How long have you been Principal in this school? • Tell me a little about your teaching background- what roles have you experienced that help you as a Principal?
School Context and SEN Provision	• Tell me about the ethos of the school- Is there an inclusive ethos? How is this evident? • Do you think there are any challenges to including pupils with SEN in your school? • In the last few years, the new model of resource allocation has brought about many changes. What has been the impact on practice in your school in light of these policy changes?

Whole-school Approach	• Are there school-wide systems in place to communicate information about students with special educational needs? • Are there school-wide systems in place to promote teaching and learning for pupils with SEN?
SENCO Role and Responsibilities from Principal's perspective	• Tell me about the role of the SENCO. What does/ he or she do? • Are there other duties that you think the SENCO should be doing? Does the SENCO have responsibilities that you feel they should not have? • Do the duties of the SENCO support you in your role as Principal? If so, how?
Leadership in SEN	• In your opinion, to what extent do SENCOs lead and coordinate the strategic planning of SEN provision in your school? • Does your SENCO meet with the Senior Leadership Team, if so how often? Tell me about how the SENCO works with the Senior Leadership Team?
SENCO, Principal and Staff Professional Learning	• Have you engaged in any specific professional learning for Principals (either formally accredited or informally) that supports you in your knowledge and understanding of inclusive approaches to SEN? • In your opinion, what are the professional learning needs of SENCOs to allow them to effectively enact their role? • How do you support your staff, including your SENCO, to pursue in-service education in this area?
Conclusion	• If you could make a recommendation to the Minister for Education about the SENCO role, what would you say?

4.6.2.3 Piloting the interviews

It is suggested that piloting of any instrument be undertaken to fine-tune design (Robson 2011) and this will allow for changes within the interview protocol if necessary (Creswell, 2013). Piloting allowed for clarification of questions and provided experience in interviewing skills (Braun and Clarke 2013) once ethical clearance was granted. Mertens (2005, p 199-205) outlines advice on conducting pilot interviews and subsequent engagements with participants and this was consulted with consistently during the piloting of the interviews. Two pilot interviews took place during March 2023 (Appendix 12: cover email; Appendix 13: Information Sheet;

Appendix 14: Informed Consent Form). The SENCO schedule was piloted first with a female SENCO who had 4 years' experience as a SENCO and had completed the *Postgraduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs* from Mary Immaculate College. The pilot Principal interview was my second pilot and the male participant had eight years' experience as a Principal in a rural school with 110 pupils. In addition, this Principal was also working as a SET in his school. Prior to the first pilot interview, I printed the interview schedule and wrote some bullet points, reminders and prompts to assist my administration of the interview. I used the record and transcription functions in Microsoft Teams and thus the piloting process enabled me to become proficient in using the technology. At the end of the interview, the SENCO participant provided feedback on the questions and the process to me and I also engaged in self-reflection. The participants' feedback was positive and constructive and they felt that the topics and themes that were the focus of the interview were important and relevant to the SENCO role. No additional questions or themes were suggested. The participant felt that one question was too similar to an already asked question and this was therefore removed ('Are there opportunities to share your expertise with other colleagues?' was removed due to being similar to 'Do you discuss new practices or new knowledge in SEN with the SEN team or other teachers?'). Some procedural suggestions were also made by the participant and these were adopted for all subsequent interviews. These included the following:

- The researcher should indicate to the participant at the start of the interview that questions could be repeated and clarified if needed;
- When giving detail on the top three responses from the Phase One survey in a question, the researcher should repeat these for the participant to ensure that they have fully understood the question; and
- The researcher should send some of the quantitative SEN provision context questions (e.g. 'How many pupils are receiving SEN supports in your school?', 'How many SNAs and SETs are in your school?', 'Do you have a special class in your school?' and 'Do you have a Home School Liaison Officer in your school?') to the participants prior to the interview so that the participants have this information at hand for the interview. It was felt this would assist with the ease of completion of the interview.

The participant also suggested some ‘tweaking’ was required with certain terminology in order to enhance clarity. For example, the participant suggested referring to ‘Senior Leadership Team’ instead of ‘SLT’ as their first understanding of this abbreviation was ‘Speech and Language Therapist’. It was also suggested to not use the word ‘enablers’ when talking about factors that enabled the SENCOs to fulfil the role as it may be ambiguous for the participants. Instead the word was replaced with the phrase ‘factors that enabled you’. Finally, the participant suggested providing clarity on some wording used in the researcher’s questions to avoid ambiguity. For example, for the phrase ‘inadequate external support’ it was suggested that the researcher should clarify who this relates to and as a result this term was replaced with ‘inadequate support from external professional services’.

In reflection after this first interview, I noted that I was not inclined to deviate from the interview schedule. My use of the schedule was somewhat prescriptive. Towards the end of this first interview, I found when I moved back and forth between topics the participants became more relaxed and this resulted in more of a guided conversation (Yin 2009), which in turn elicited experiential data. For the second pilot interview, I focused on adopting the suggestions, outlined above, and I asked the questions in a more flexible manner thus facilitating a guided conversation. I was not concerned with asking all the questions especially if that topic had already been sufficiently answered by the participant and I focused more on a flexible approach where I treated the interview schedule as a series of themes and topics. I also asked for more examples to encourage the participant to speak about their experiences in a more specific manner. The participant was prepared as I had sent them the quantitative SEN provision contextual questions in advance. The feedback from this second pilot interview was positive and I found the process far easier. The participant found the questions easy to understand and follow and they felt that all relevant themes and topics were covered. Minor alterations regarding the wording of questions were given by the participant as feedback and these alterations were made. The participant also commented that a small number of questions were similar and that duplicates should be removed. In light of this, questions that covered the same topic area were omitted and the ordering of some questions was altered to enhance the flow of the interview. Based on this piloting experience the approach adopted in the second pilot interview

was followed for all of the Phase Two interviews and the specific suggestions outlined by pilot participant number 1 (SESCO participant) were adhered to.

Piloting the interviews also indicated a guide time, which informed arrangements for appointing the interviews. The interviews took approximately 55 minutes to complete and therefore 75 minutes was scheduled through Microsoft Teams for all subsequent Phase Two interviews.

4.6.2.4 Administering the interviews

In Phase One the participants were asked to express an interest in participating in Phase Two (Appendix 15). This list was used to recruit participants and schools were also emailed to request participants (Appendix 16 for cover email). Prior to the interviews being administered the nine participants were emailed the information sheets (Appendix 17) and the informed consent forms (Appendix 18). It is noted in the literature that the greatest challenge for the researcher is choosing questions, which encourage participants to talk openly and expansively (Brenner 2006; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). With this in mind, the researcher began with broad, general questions and then followed with questions that focused on key themes of the research. Outlining the structure of the interview and being explicit regarding expectations attempted to put the participants at ease (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Patton (2002) outlined that the broad questions at the start should be close to the participants' experience and expertise. This can create a relaxed atmosphere from the start. In addition, at the start of the interview I covered ethical issues, consent and confidentiality. Unanticipated themes were probed as this is allowed for when using a semi-structured interview approach (Robson 2011). A neutral stance was maintained at all times through verbal and non-verbal probing such as nodding and neutral verbalisations. It was crucial for the researcher not to verbalise agreement of topics discussed. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams to facilitate the recording and transcription of the interviews. The use of online platforms for interviews removes geographical barriers and can reduce the burden of time and cost of participating in research (Carter *et al.* 2021). Participants do not have to travel for the interview or have to consider hosting the researcher themselves (Carter *et al.* 2021). This medium was also convenient for the participants as they could do the interview in a location where they had privacy and could talk openly and freely in

a confidential manner. It was essentially a location of their choosing that was neutral and at a time that was convenient for them. Limitations of online interviews relate to the need for good-quality internet connections to facilitate the interview and the need for participants to be familiar with the use of this online technology (Carter *et al.* 2021). The SENCO interview schedule was used with the SENCOs regardless of whether they were also a SET or Principal. In addition, the Principal schedule was used when interviewing the Principals who were not also the SENCO in their school.

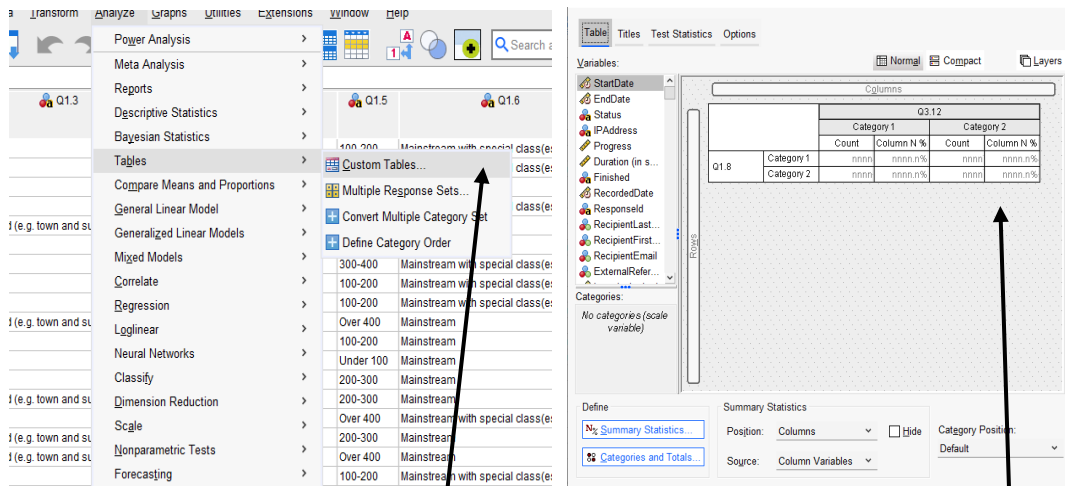
4.7 Data Analysis

In this section the data analysis for both Phase One and Phase Two are detailed. As the research design used a sequential approach, the analysis for both phases were carried out separately with the analysis of the Phase One data taking place before Phase Two data collection. This allowed for the analysed findings from Phase One to be used in the design of the Phase Two data collection instrumentation, namely the semi-structured interviews. The findings derived from the analysis of both Phases will be presented in Chapters Five and Six and subsequently the findings were integrated and combined in the Discussion Chapter (Chapter Seven).

4.7.1 Phase One data analysis

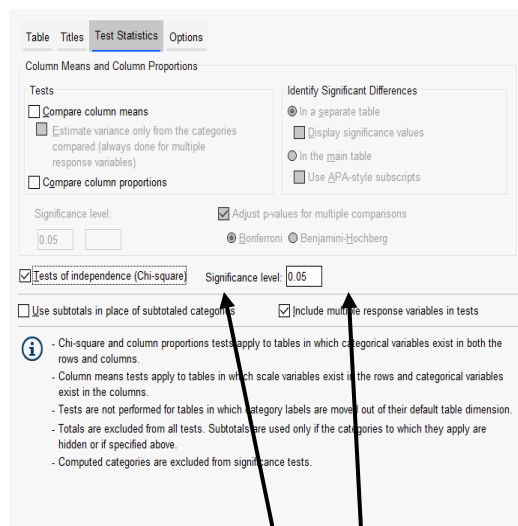
Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the participants' responses to the closed questions within the survey. The resultant quantitative data set from Qualtrics was exported into an Excel database where frequency distributions, measures of central tendency (mean and median scores) and visual representations of the data (bar and pie charts) were generated. Inferential statistical analysis was conducted to assess associations between post of responsibility status and various factors, such as school size, DEIS status, proportion of pupils with SEN, systems of collaboration, working with the SLT, and response to statements regarding their role. All statistical analyses were conducted in SPSS (Version 28, IBM, Armonk, New York, NY, USA) and Chi-square tests were used. In addition, the SENCOs post of responsibility types were grouped as Middle Leadership (Assistant Principal 1 and Assistant Principal 2) and Senior Leadership (Principal and Deputy Principal) and Chi-square tests were used to assess if there were associations between management status (Middle Leadership v

Senior Leadership) and various factors, such as working with the SLT, response to statements regarding their role, and components of a postgraduate SENCO specific programme. Statistical significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$. Where $> 20\%$ of cells had expected count < 5 , rating categories were combined. For example ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ were combined into one category, as were ‘strongly disagree’ and ‘disagree’. In Figure 4.5 steps are shown that were followed when conducting the Chi-square tests in SPSS.



Selecting the Chi-square test.
Custom Table function initially selected

Custom Table set-up. Q3.12 relates to PoR status (Yes or No) & Q1.8 relates to School DEIS status (Yes or No)



Selecting the Chi-square test and setting significance level at 0.05

Custom Tables

Table 1

		Q3.12		Q3.12	
		No	Yes	No	Yes
Q1.8	No	68	178	67.3%	65.9%
	Yes	33	92	32.7%	34.1%

Pearson Chi-Square Tests

		Q3.12
Q1.8	Chi-square	.065
	df	1
	Sig.	.799

Results are based on nonempty rows and columns in each innermost subtable.

Output from Chi-square test showing the count, % values and Chi-square results

Figure 4.5: Process followed in completing Chi-square test via SPSS.

There were two open-ended questions in the survey where the participants provided short comments related to both enablers and barriers to SENCO role enactment. For most these comments were short and concise and generally a few words to one sentence in length. A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke 2020) was used to analyse the responses to the open-ended questions. Details relating to this analysis method are provided in section 3.8.2 below. The RTA on the responses to the two-open ended questions involved the use of Microsoft Excel, which has been purported as an accessible and effective approach to thematic analysis suitable to interview and survey data (Bree and Gallagher 2015) (refer to section 4.7.2.1 for extant literature related to the use of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software, CAQDAS). This software package allows for the organisation, coding and classification of data (Bree and Gallagher 2015). Using Microsoft Excel allows for levels of engagement with data and provides ‘opportunities to present lists of codes and data...to easily access’ (Braun and Clarke 2022, p.68). Microsoft Excel was used to aid the RTA and supported the coding process and the development of the various categories, sub-themes and themes. In Figure 4.6, a screenshot from the coding in Excel is provided. The various codes were listed across the first row of the Excel file and when the comment from the participant related to that code the number 1 was inserted into the cell. This allowed for the number of units of meaning for each code to be calculated. Microsoft Excel can support a data-driven inductive approach leading to the identification of thematic areas (Bree and Gallagher 2015).

Barriers	No Role Recognition	Multi-role/ Dual Role (e.g. working as SET as well)	Teaching and SENCO	Multiple Posts	Time for SENCO Duties	Lack of collaboration time	Workload
Is there anything that has acted as a barrier to the effective execution of your SENCO role?							
Nothing concrete provided which is a huge barrier-whoever is carrying out role of coordinator of		1					
Time						1	
Paperwork overload - form filling and assessment							
Dealing with people who have little or no understanding of the human condition.						1	
Time in the working day. Waiting lists for multi-disciplinary teams.							
Time							
Time, lack of training in new initiatives						1	
not enough support teachers or SNAs							
Time						1	
Time, workload						1	
Not enough supports for children and having to go through exceptional reviews with the NCSE to							1
Inadequate support from external agencies							
Time (or lack of) as I try to teach as well						1	
TIME trying to allocate time to support children from limited hours PTR-classes are too big. Too						1	
Small SEN Team, Overload of paperwork, Due to slight drop in pupil numbers I am now teaching in			1				
Lack of SNA approval after lengthy application/Trying to avoid using SET Teacher as substitute							
time, other responsibilities within the school			1			1	
Language can be a huge barrier in my role, when referrals have been made it is hard to get an							
Being timetable also as SET teacher and not having the appropriate time to give SENCO role			1			1	
Time, I cannot be both a good teacher and a good senco one always has to suffer			1			1	
Time, managing expectations, resistance to changing established patterns of support teaching			1				
Teaching full time as it is difficult to contact agencies etc in the evening			1			1	
The amount of paperwork involved. Time (it just slips by)			1				
There is no such thing as a "SENCO" in a small primary school. It is just the SET teacher.		1					
the rotation of teachers into/ out of the SET Team - can be almost on a yearly basis where the team							
Lack of time as I am teaching deputy principal, volume of paperwork, lack of available resources			1			1	
Not enough hours in the day for the admin side of Special Education.						1	
Please read last comment. Also paperwork is a nightmare. Looking forward to changing careers							
Not having a NEPs psychologist appointed to cater for our school since Sept. 2022.							
Time						1	
Sheer volume of paperwork							
Provision of in school supports from health service professionals.							
Lack of time or time pressure						1	

Figure 4.6: Screenshot of manual coding in Excel for the participants’ comments related to SENCO role barriers.

In Table 4.6, the details regarding the number of codes and units of meaning coded for each phase of the RTA are provided for both the enablers and barriers. For an audit trail of the codebook for each phase for the data pertaining to the enablers and barriers refer to Appendices 19 and 20 respectively.

Table 4.6: Summary of number of codes, categories, sub-themes and themes with units of meaning coded in relation to the data regarding enablers and barriers.

Phase	Enablers	Barriers
Phase 2 (Data coding)	18 codes with 497 units of meaning coded	22 codes with 645 units of meaning coded
Phase 3 (Generating initial themes)	12 categories with 478 units of meaning coded	10 categories with 527 units of meaning coded
Phase 4 (Developing and reviewing themes)	4 initial themes with 478 units of meaning	4 initial themes with 527 units of meaning coded
Phase 5 (Refining, defining and naming themes)	1 Theme with 4 Sub-Themes	1 Theme and 4 Sub-Themes

4.7.2 Phase Two data analysis

RTA (Braun and Clarke 2020) was used to analyse the data in Phase 2. Thematic analysis offers a distinctive way of working with qualitative data that seeks to identify ‘patterns’ in data (Braun and Clarke 2020, p.330). This approach to data analysis is compatible with the assumptions of a qualitative paradigm (Braun and Clarke 2019). RTA ‘emphasises the importance of the researcher’s subjectivity as analytic resource, and their reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation’ (Braun and Clarke 2020, p.330) and involves a ‘recursive engagement with the data’ (Braun *et al.* n.d.). The researcher’s engagement and immersion in the data is a central element of this process of RTA, thus aligning with the interpretivist approach to this research. Gough and Lyons (2016) highlight that thematic analysis is a process that requires ‘headspace’ and time for insights to be developed. This time with the data can help deliver ‘rich, complex, non-obvious themes’ that would have been unexpected prior to the analysis (Braun and Clarke 2020, p.332). The RTA process used in this research resulted in the conceptualising of such themes (outlined in the following Results Chapter) which Braun and Clarke (2020, p.331) refer to as ‘patterns of shared meaning, cohering around a central concept’. Themes have also been conceptualised

‘as stories about particular patterns of shared meaning across the dataset’ (Braun and Clarke 2019, p.592). The RTA suited this research as it allowed for both an inductive and deductive analysis of the data. This process was both ‘grounded’ in the data (inductive) and the theoretical framework and existing theory and concepts underpinning the research provided the lens through which I analysed and interpreted the data (deductive) (Braun and Clarke 2020).

Braun and Clarke’s most recent articulation of their six-phase process for data engagement, coding and theme development is outlined in Table 4.7 (Braun and Clarke 2020; Braun *et al.* n.d.)

Table 4.7: Reflexive Thematic Analysis: Phases and description of each phase (Adapted from Braun *et al.* n.d.).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis	Description of the Phase
1. Familiarisation	This phase involves reading and re-reading the data, to become immersed and intimately familiar with its content, and making notes on your initial analytic observations and insights, both in relation to each individual data item (e.g. an interview transcript) and in relation to the entire dataset
2. Data coding	This phase involves generating succinct labels (codes) that capture and evoke important features of the data that might be relevant to addressing the research question. It involves coding the entire dataset, with two or more rounds of coding, and after that, collating all the codes and all relevant data extracts, together for later stages of analysis
3. Generating initial themes from coded and collated data (developing categories)	This phase involves examining the codes and collated data to begin to develop significant broader patterns of meaning (potential themes). It then involves collating data relevant to each candidate theme, so that you can work with the data and review the viability of each candidate theme
4. Developing and reviewing themes	This phase involves checking the candidate themes against the coded data and the entire dataset, to determine that they tell a convincing story of the data, and one that addresses the research question. In this phase, themes are further developed, which sometimes involves them being split, combined, or discarded. In this approach, themes are defined as pattern of shared meaning underpinned by a central concept or idea.

5. Refining, defining and naming themes	This phase involves developing a detailed analysis of each theme, working out the scope and focus of each theme, determining the ‘story’ of each. It also involves deciding on an informative name for each theme.
6. Writing the report	This final phase involves weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts, and contextualising the analysis in relation to existing literature.

This new RTA articulation from Braun and Clarke (2020) emphasises a phase-approach as opposed to individual steps, which is not intended to be followed rigidly. The six phases can blend together and the analytic process becomes increasingly intertwined and recursive (Braun and Clarke 2020). While the phases are sequential and build on each other the process is recursive with movement back and forth between the phases (Braun *et al.* n.d.). The RTA process used in this research involved following the six phases, pausing along the way to go back to the previous phase, then moving forward, then returning to the beginning, then forward again in a constant circular looping manner. Throughout the process, I was immersed in the data ‘reading, reflecting, questioning, imagining, wondering, writing, retreating, returning’ (Braun and Clarke 2020, p.332). Qualitative data analysis software, namely NVivo 12 was used to aid the RTA and detail pertaining to the use of NVivo is provided in the next section.

4.7.2.1 Using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software

NVivo 12 is a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), which is essentially a data management package aimed at supporting the researcher during the data analysis process (Zamawe 2015). CAQDAS emerged in the 1980s (Zamawe 2015) and examples of packages include ATLAS.ti, MAXqda, N6 and NVivo (Zamawe 2015). Since the 1980s CAQDAS has advanced to become a powerful, flexible and well established medium to assist the analysis of data (Cohen *et al.* 2018). The abbreviation CAQDAS is now more often referred to as QDAS (qualitative data analysis software) (Braun and Clarke 2022). Early criticism of QDAS purported that this method can distant or separate researchers from their data (Scott and Morrison 2006). However, Jackson *et al.* (2018) noted that such criticisms are unsubstantiated and outdated and questions why this criticism continues to circulate.

Using QDAS is appropriate when the purpose is for the technology to serve the research rather than lead or drive the research (Jackson and Bazeley 2019). QDAS provide the researcher with tools but the analysis itself is a process of mind (Evers 2018). Cohen *et al.* (2018, p.650) concurs with this and noted that ‘software does not analyse material; humans do’. Using QDAS, such as NVivo, can offer ‘leaps in productivity’ (Patton 2015, p.530) and ‘can boost the accuracy and speed of the analysis process’ (Zamawe 2015, p.15) and can reduce bias within qualitative research (Feng and Behar-Horenstein 2019). It has also been emphasised by Zamawe (2015, p.15) that the main function of QDAS is not to analyse data but instead ‘to aid the analysis process which the researcher must always remain in control of’. Benefits of NVivo are amplified with large data sets, such as in Phase Two of this research, and include organisation of data files according to different groups, data management, centralisation of coding and ability to ‘more easily re-code extracts’ (Braun and Clarke 2022, p.68). While QDAS and NVivo offer exceptional data management and organisation benefits it is important for the researcher to remember that ‘the real analytical work takes place in your head’ (Patton 2015, p.530).

NVivo 12 was used with this large data set as it aided the management of the data and assisted the ‘researcher better understand the participants’ viewpoints’ (Feng and Behar-Horenstein 2019, p.570). NVivo has been referred to as an effective ‘tool for transparency’ (Egan 2013, p.128) and the features in NVivo allowed for the creation of an extensive and transparent audit trail (Appendix 22-29) mapping the thought processes, coding patterns, and thematic development involved in the analysis process. The following sections provide an overview of each step of the data analysis process using NVivo 12.

4.7.2.2 *Sorting the qualitative data*

All interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams, which allowed for the automatic transcription of the interviews. Subsequently the interviews were listened back to and the transcriptions checked for accuracy with any errors corrected. This transcribing took place as soon as possible after each interview and allowed the researcher to become familiar with the data and to become embedded in the process. The final transcriptions were then imported into NVivo 12 (Figure 4.7) and case classifications were created which held participant attribute information (Figure 4.8).

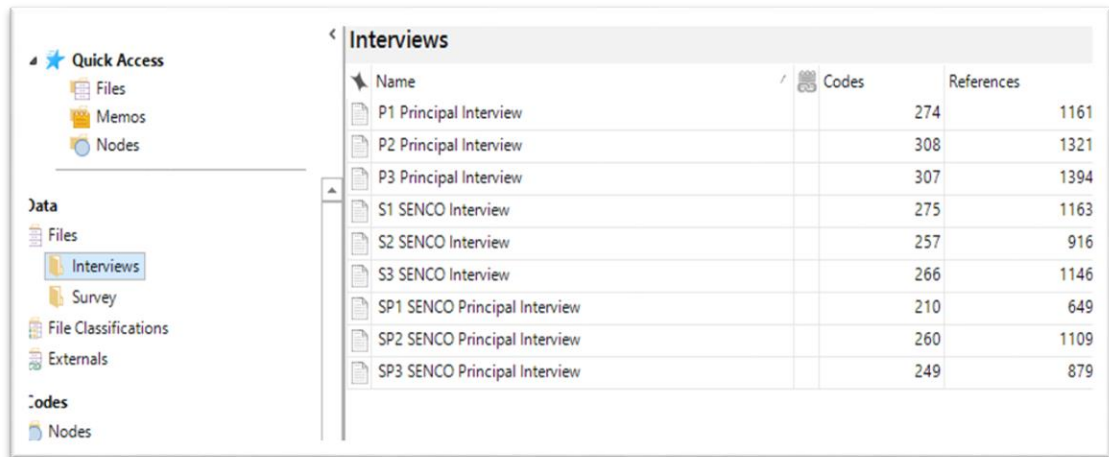


Figure 4.7: Importing of interview data into NVivo 12

Case Profiles						
	A : Role	B : Years SET Experience	C : Years in Teaching Pr...	D : Years as Principal	E : Years as SENCO	F : SEN Qualification, Y...
1 : P1 Principal I...	Principal	0	21-25	1-5	Not Applicable	No
2 : P2 Principal I...	Principal	0	21-25	6-10	Not Applicable	No
3 : P3 Principal I...	Principal	0	36-40	31-35	Not Applicable	No
4 : S1 SENCO In...	SET and SENCO	11-15	31-35	Not Applicable	1-5	Yes
5 : S2 SENCO In...	SET and SENCO	1-5	21-25	Not Applicable	1-5	No
6 : S3 SENCO In...	SET and SENCO	11-15	16-20	Not Applicable	6-10	No
7 : SP1 SENCO ...	Principal and SENCO	1-5	21-25	1-5	1-5	Yes
8 : SP2 SENCO ...	Principal and SENCO	6-10	11-15	1-5	1-5	No
9 : SP3 SENCO ...	Principal and SENCO	1-5	31-35	11-15	1-5	Yes

Figure 4.8: Case profiles with participant attribute information

4.7.2.3 Phases of the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2020).

The six steps undertaken by the researcher are outlined in Table 4.6 and specific detail on each step of Braun and Clarke's (2020) recursive process is provided in the following sub-sections. Folders related to this six-step process were set-up in NVivo 12 (Figure 4.9).

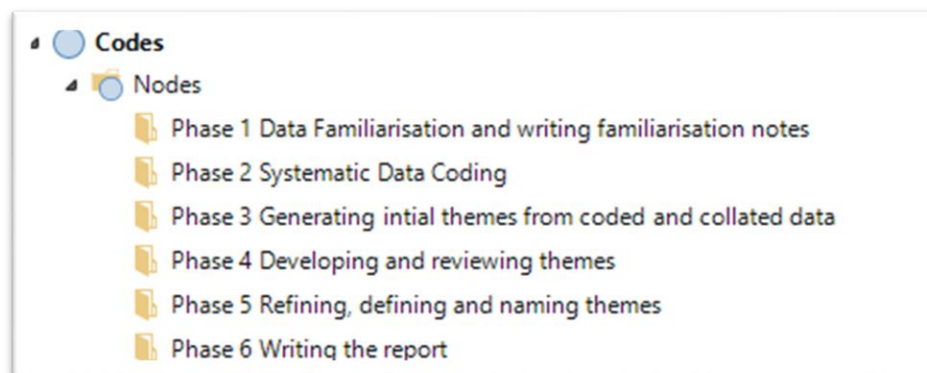


Figure 4.9: Six-steps from Braun and Clarke (2020) evident in NVivo 12

Phase One: Familiarising yourself with the data

This phase involved data familiarisation where I immersed myself in the data and read and re-read the interview transcriptions (Robson 2011), while writing hand-written notes on these transcripts (Braun and Clarke 2022) (Appendix 21). While the transcriptions were automatically generated on Microsoft Teams, I listened repeatedly to the recordings to ensure accuracy with the transcriptions. This involved correcting any errors in the text and punctuation in the automated version of the transcriptions. This process of proofreading and editing to ensure accuracy in the transcription allowed the researcher to become fully immersed in the data (Robson 2011) and familiar with the data. In NVivo this phase involved the use of annotations to integrate contextual factors such as field notes, observations as well as the researcher's thoughts and ideas during this phase. Specifically, annotations were made regarding the participants' facial gestures and other non-verbal communication. An example of this type of annotation is evident in Figure 4.10 (also Appendix 22). This allowed the researcher to gain a more comprehensive interpretation of what the participant was saying and allowed the interview to become more of a social encounter rather than just a record of data (Cohen *et al.* 2018).

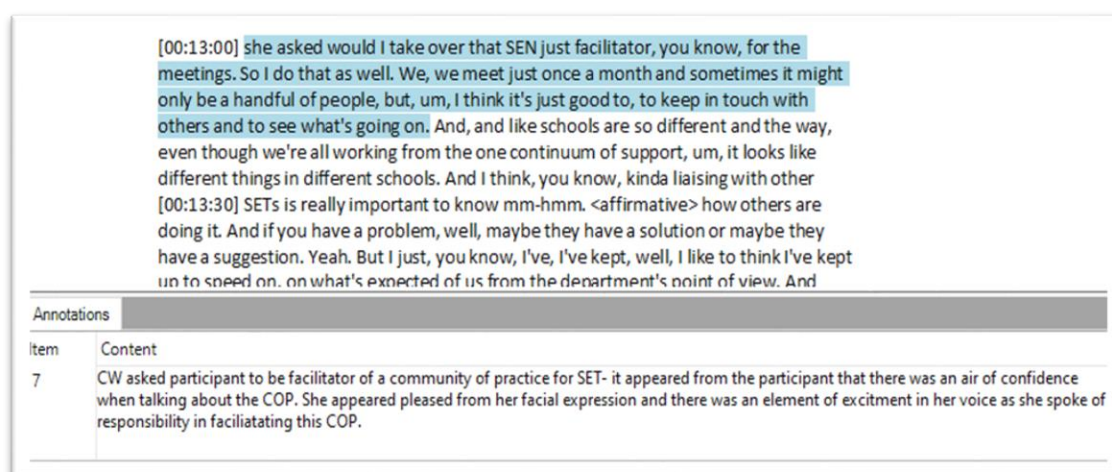
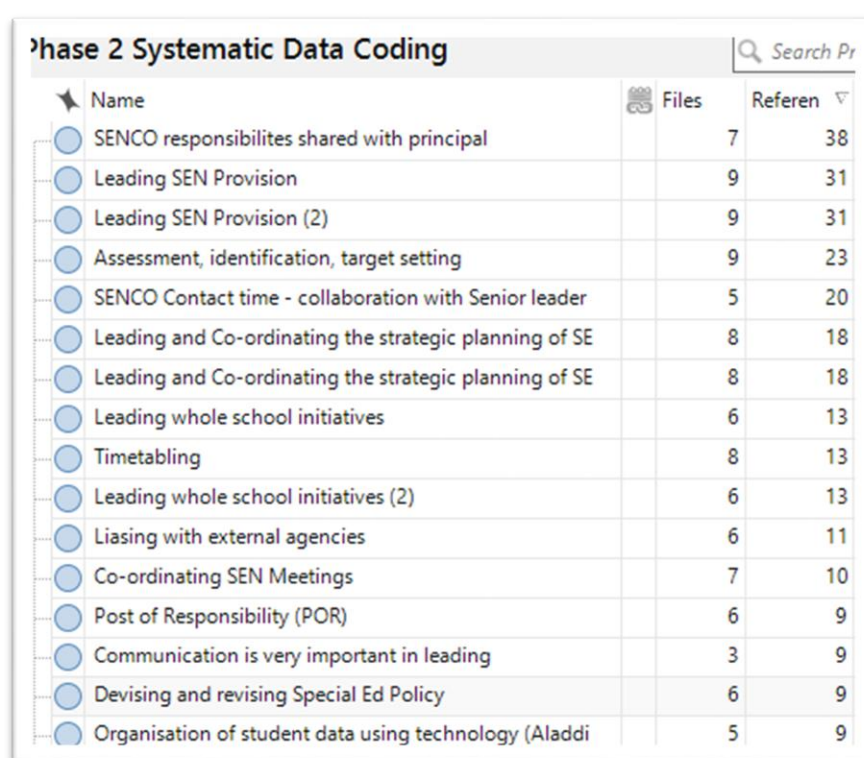


Figure 4.10: Example of an annotation where facial expressions and interpretation noted.

Phase Two: Systematic data coding

During this phase, the data were coded into small units of analysis, which 'capture specific and particular meanings within the data set, of relevance to your research question' (Braun and Clarke 2022, p.52). This coding in Phase Two was a process and

the outputs from this process were the codes themselves and the code labels (Braun and Clarke 2022). The codes generated were the building blocks of what would eventually become the themes of this research. Labels were given to each code, which provided a description of the analytic idea behind the code and the data meanings captured by the code. In Appendix 23, all of the 156 initial codes with a description of the code, interviews coded and units of meaning coded are detailed. In NVivo the codes are termed ‘nodes’ and the researcher went back and forth coding and recoding to identify conducive codes and discard any unnecessary detail (Byrne 2022). The coding process was both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (researcher- or theory-driven) in nature (Braun and Clarke 2022) and identified semantic (surface-level data) and latent (deeper, implicit or underlying meaning) codes (Braun and Clarke 2022). After this coding and re-coding process was complete, I moved onto Phase Three of the RTA. In Figure 4.11, a screenshot from NVivo of this coding process is evident.



Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding			
Name	Files	Referen	
SENCO responsibilities shared with principal	7	38	
Leading SEN Provision	9	31	
Leading SEN Provision (2)	9	31	
Assessment, identification, target setting	9	23	
SENCO Contact time - collaboration with Senior leader	5	20	
Leading and Co-ordinating the strategic planning of SE	8	18	
Leading and Co-ordinating the strategic planning of SE	8	18	
Leading whole school initiatives	6	13	
Timetabling	8	13	
Leading whole school initiatives (2)	6	13	
Liasing with external agencies	6	11	
Co-ordinating SEN Meetings	7	10	
Post of Responsibility (POR)	6	9	
Communication is very important in leading	3	9	
Devising and revising Special Ed Policy	6	9	
Organisation of student data using technology (Aladdi	5	9	

Figure 4.11: Phase Two – data coding in NVivo.

Phase Three: Generating initial themes from coded and collated data (developing categories)

Phase three of the RTA involved the grouping of codes into initial themes (categories), using NVivo. All of these initial themes were collated under the Phase Three folder in

NVivo. This process involved ‘clustering together the potentially connected codes into candidate themes’ and from this ‘exploring these initial meaning patterns’ (Braun and Clarke 2022, p.79). In this process I explored this clustering of patterned meaning across the entire dataset as opposed to within a single data item or single participant interview. In total the 156 codes were clustered into 26 initial themes or categories that related to the research questions (Appendix 24: Phase Three Codebook). In Figure 4.12, a screenshot of some of these initial themes with the individual codes for each theme (category) is displayed.

Phase 3 Generating initial themes from coded and collated data			
Name	Files	Referen	
SENCO Roles and Responsibilities	9	137	
Principals views on how they work with the SENCO role	9	124	
SENCO and Leading	9	84	
Leading SEN Provision	9	31	
Leading and Co-ordinating the strategic planning of SEN	8	18	
Leading whole school initiatives	6	13	
Post of Responsibility (POR)	6	9	
Communication is very important in leading	3	9	
Resistance to wanting to lead whole school Initiatives	2	2	
SENCO given specific time for SENCO duties	2	2	
SEN and Staff Professional Learning	9	70	
SENCO Professional Learning	9	68	
SETAM	9	65	
SENCO working with SLT	8	65	
SENCO responsibilities shared with principal	7	38	
SENCO Contact time - collaboration with Senior leadersh	5	20	
SEN issues being discussed at the BOM meetings	4	6	
SENCOs having Insufficient Time with SENIOR Leadership	1	1	
SENCO Role Barriers	9	56	

Figure 4.12: Phase Three – generating initial themes in NVivo.

Phase Four: Developing and reviewing themes

This phase involved a process of re-engagement to check initial development with the coded data extracts and the entire data set (Braun and Clarke 2022). This process also involved ‘a validity check on the quality and scope of the candidate themes’ (Braun and Clarke 2022, p. 97). This phase fostered a recursive process and a revisit to the earlier phases to check that the codes and initial themes were an accurate reflection of

patterned meanings across the entire data set. A number of new codes were added at this stage to reflect additional patterned meanings from the interview data sets, such as the code ‘Pastoral care’. During this stage there was revision to the candidate themes, which involved the combination of initial themes into one broader theme (Braun and Clarke 2022). Specifically, the 26 initial themes were consolidated into 10 reviewed themes (Appendix 25: Phase Four Codebook). In Figure 4.13, a visual of this process from NVivo is displayed.

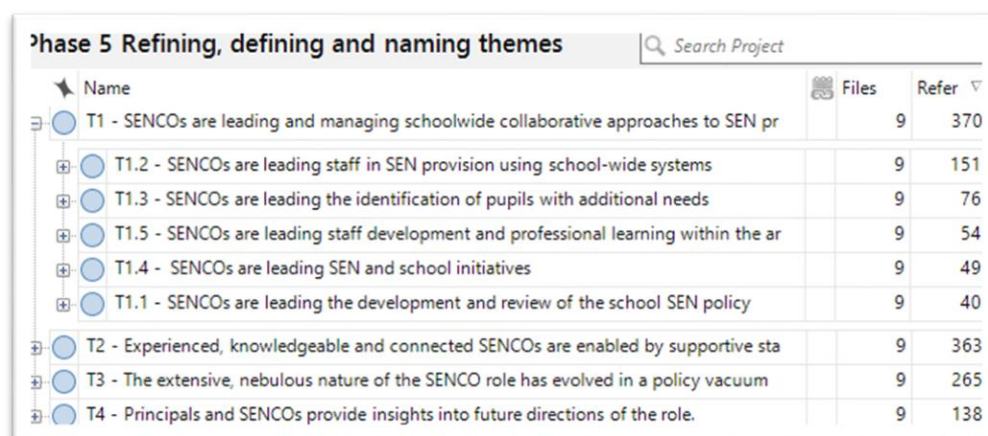
Phase 4 Developing and reviewing themes			
Name	Files	Referen	
SENCO Role - Duties and Responsibilities	9	235	
SENCO Roles and Responsibilities	9	137	
Extensive Workload	8	53	
Most important SENCO roles	9	42	
SENCO Roles written into School SEN Policy	1	3	
Inclusive Practices	9	159	
Professional Learning	9	159	
SENCO Leading Aspects of SEN and Working with the SLT	9	149	
Principals views on how they work with the SENCO role	9	141	
SENCO Role Challenges and Barriers	9	92	
SENCO Future Vision	9	92	
Impact of Policy Changes and SETAM	9	91	
Perceptions of the SENCO Role - Staff and SENCOs' percepti	7	45	
SENCO Role Enablers	9	42	

Figure 4.13: Phase Four – Developing and refining themes in NVivo.

Phase Five: Refining, defining and naming themes

Phase five involved further development and amendment of themes together with ‘refining work of figuring out the structure and flow of your analysis’ (Braun and Clarke 2022, p.108). This phase resulted in the refinement of the ten themes from phase four into 4 themes and 13 sub-themes (Appendix 26: Phase Five Codebook). Essentially this phase involved mapping how the researcher will report and tell the ‘overall story’ of the data related to the research questions (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.92). An example of the flow from codes to initial themes to themes is displayed in Appendix 27. This process resulted in the development of the thematic map (Appendix 28; Chapter Six, Figure 6.1), which provided structure for the reporting and write-up of the analysis. The four overall themes were defined in a manner that captures how the theme contributes to the overall analysis and informs the reader of the central

meaning within the theme. These theme and sub-theme names ‘capture the essence of the theme and engages the reader’ (Braun and Clarke 2022, p.112).



Phase 5 Refining, defining and naming themes			Search Project
Name	Files	Refer	
T1 - SENCOs are leading and managing schoolwide collaborative approaches to SEN pr	9	370	
T1.2 - SENCOs are leading staff in SEN provision using school-wide systems	9	151	
T1.3 - SENCOs are leading the identification of pupils with additional needs	9	76	
T1.5 - SENCOs are leading staff development and professional learning within the ar	9	54	
T1.4 - SENCOs are leading SEN and school initiatives	9	49	
T1.1 - SENCOs are leading the development and review of the school SEN policy	9	40	
T2 - Experienced, knowledgeable and connected SENCOs are enabled by supportive sta	9	363	
T3 - The extensive, nebulous nature of the SENCO role has evolved in a policy vacuum	9	265	
T4 - Principals and SENCOs provide insights into future directions of the role.	9	138	

Figure 4.14: Refining, defining and naming themes in NVivo.

Phase Six: Writing the report

Phase Six of this RTA involved the write-up of the findings under the four themes and 13 sub-themes. The write-up provided the space for the analysis to take shape and ‘to tell the *whole* analytic story’ and ‘to bring it all together’ (Braun and Clarke 2022, p.118). To aid this process, analytic memos were created in NVivo (Appendix 29). Direct quotes from the participant interviews were also utilised in the write-up, which were ‘embedded within an analytic narrative that compellingly illustrates the story’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.93). This phase of the RTA provided the researcher with an additional opportunity to explore latent meanings within the findings and to frame the analysis within the selected theoretical framework for this research, namely Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory (2005).

4.8 Quality of the Research

In recent years, qualitative research has become more prominent in social sciences and settling on one definition is difficult as qualitative studies genre is broad, complex and growing (Brantlinger *et al.* 2005). A definition which is deemed inclusive is that qualitative research is ‘a systematic approach to understanding qualities, or the essential nature, or a phenomenon within a particular context’ (Brantlinger *et al.* 2005, p.195). As this study is set in the interpretivist paradigm the central aim is to ‘understand the subjective world of human experience’ (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, p.33) and to interpret what the participants are thinking, and for the researcher to make meaning of their data through their own thinking and cognitive processing of data following interactions and dialogue with participants (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). As Brantlinger *et al.* (2005) outlines, qualitative researchers often call themselves ‘the instrument’ in their research explorations. It is the researcher that formulates the ideas and questions of the study, they clarify their conceptual or theoretical frameworks, decide on designs to answer questions, collect data, sort, read, take notes to make sense of the information collected and eventually tell and write up the story. In order to be a valid instrument and do this qualitative work well it is insisted that the researcher must have experience of the research focus and be ‘knowledgeable, analytical, reflective and introspective’ (Brantlinger *et al.* 2005, p.197). Brantlinger *et al.* (2005) also note that there has been controversy among qualitative researchers relating to various opinions regarding subjectivity and objectivity. Those that are on the more positivist end of the qualitative to quantitative continuum see that research validity is interfered with by subjectivity and that this may be bracketed by attempting to control assumptions and biases during the research process. Being explicit about values, personal positions and perspectives rather than believing that it is possible to become neutral, distant, and objective is recommended by most qualitative researchers (Peshkin 1988; Harry 1996) and is recognised in RTA (Braun and Clarke 2022). It is necessary to outline that this study was conducted using procedures to mitigate threats to the quality of the research even though these threats cannot be completely erased (Stake 1995; Cohen *et al.* 2018).

The criteria for judging the quality of research is dependent on which paradigm the research is located. Within quantitative, positivist research four main criteria are used to validate research, which are internal validity, external validity, reliability and

objectivity (Burns 2000). Internal validity defines the extent to which the researcher can remove confounding variables in the study and external validity is concerned with the degree to which the results of the study can be generalised in and to other contexts (Prochaska 2017). Validity in research ‘pertains to the degree that a method investigates what it is intended to investigate’ (Brinkman and Kvale 2018, pp. 142-143). Reliability refers to the extent to which a research instrument produces stable results that are consistent over time (Kirk and Miller 1986; Robson 2011). Objectivity refers to the degree that all sources of bias are minimised and that personal and subjective ideas are eliminated as much as possible (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). Creswell and Miller (2000) outline that in qualitative research issues of reliability and validity are addressed through trustworthiness, transparency, honesty, authenticity, depth, scope, subjectivity, emotion, and idiographic approaches to capturing individuals.

It was suggested by Guba in 1981 that research conducted in the interpretivist paradigm uses four criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity in place of the criteria of a positivist paradigm that is internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity. The four criteria include credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). The criteria for judging the quality of qualitative research that parallel the judging of criteria for the quantitative, positivist research has been documented in the literature (Guba and Lincoln 1989, Levitt *et al.* 2018). Guba and Lincoln (1989) equate credibility with internal validity, transferability with external validity, dependability with reliability and confirmability with objectivity. From the beginning, I was mindful to meet the highest standards in relation to the quality of the research and completed the Research Integrity Training through the Epigeum training programme in 2020. Research integrity equates to quality and aims to ‘produce conclusions that reach a relatively high threshold in terms of likely validity and makes a worthwhile contribution to collective knowledge’ (Hammersley and Triantanou 2012, p.134).

4.8.1 The criterion of credibility

Credibility has been referred to as the extent to which data and the analysis are believable, authentic or trustworthy (Guba 1981; Lincoln 2009). It can therefore be

considered as the degree to which the results are a believable reflection of the topic being researched. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data together in this research enhanced the credibility within this research (Patton 2015; Levitt *et al.* 2018). It was important in this research to continuously check if there was a correspondence between the way the participants perceived the social constructs and in the manner the researcher portrayed their points of view (Mertens 2019). I used a number of strategies to enhance credibility in my study. I sought to use as many as possible as it is recommended to provide evidence from multiple sources regarding the credibility of the research. The strategies used in this study were:

- Progressive subjectivity;
- Member checks; and
- Triangulation.

(Mertens 2019)

4.8.1.1 Progressive subjectivity

Throughout the study, I monitored my own developing constructions and documented the process and the changes that occurred from the beginning to the end. Initially I documented my own position and statement of beliefs towards the research topic (Appendix 30). I used a research diary to record my thoughts, beliefs and insights throughout the study (Appendix 31) which allowed for careful monitoring of bias (Creswell and Miller 2000) in order to limit any personal influence during data analysis.

4.8.1.2 Member checks

Member checking was undertaken to ensure trustworthiness and thus credibility within the data and to potentially reduce any researcher bias through the involvement of the participants in checking and verifying the accuracy of the data and the interpretations of the data (Birt *et al.* 2016). This involved asking the participants to verify the data and my interpretations of the data for accuracy and the constructions that were being developed (Stake 1995; Merriam 2009; Mertens 2019). I emailed the transcriptions to ascertain the accuracy of information and narrative accuracy checks were carried out during the interviews to confirm my understanding of the participants' responses. On numerous occasions I used the phrase 'Can I check, am I correct in saying...' to

confirm my interpretation of the participants' narrative (Creswell and Miller 2000). By doing this, participants had the opportunity to clarify and/or confirm the accuracy of my interpretations, which enhanced the credibility of the research (Creswell and Miller 2000).

4.8.1.3 Triangulation

Triangulation involves 'checking information that has been collected from different sources or methods for consistency of evidence across sources of data' (Mertens 2019, p. 282). The researcher can triangulate by using multiple data sources (e.g. persons, places), multiple participants, and multiple perspectives of theories. In doing so there is a search for convergence of, or consistency among evidence from many and various data sources (Bratlinger *et al.* 2005). In qualitative research, triangulation is a process, which uses multiple means to verify the evidence (Merriam 2009). Using multiple methods, such as the survey from Phase One and the semi-structured interviews in Phase Two, can represent a validity measure and can result in an in-depth analysis of the data (Richards 2015). Using triangulation in this manner supports the belief that 'the convergence of multiple methods upon a single conclusion better supports that conclusion than just one of those methods arriving at the conclusion' (Heesen *et al.* 2019, p.3068).

The use of multiple participants in Phase Two (SENCOs, SENCO Principals and Principals) contributed to triangulation and in enhancing the credibility of the data. This allowed me to 'search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information' (Creswell and Miller 2000, p.126). Using multiple participants allowed for the identification of common perspectives between participants as well as contrasts, which produced a more extensive representation of the subject area (Silverman 2015). An illustration of this triangulation process is depicted in Figure 4.15.

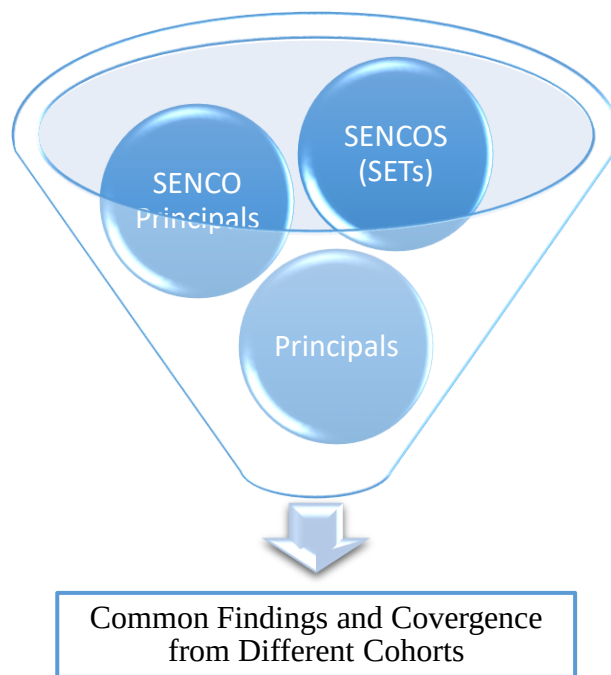


Figure 4.15: Data triangulation through the use of multiple participant cohorts.

4.8.2 The criterion of transferability (external validity)

In Phase One, the external validity of the survey was enhanced by piloting the survey with an expert researcher in the field and three experienced SENCOS. This ensured that the survey was asking questions, which were valid and relevant to the topic area.

In qualitative research (Phase Two) the criterion of transferability is used in preference to the criterion of external validity. This criterion refers to the researcher trying to ensure that they provide enough contextual data about their study so that readers of the findings can relate to what has been found, and to their own contexts (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). It is the researcher that is responsible for giving enough detail to enable the reader to judge the degree of similarities between the study site and the receiving context (Mertens 2019). This principle was adhered to throughout the findings chapters.

4.8.3 The criterion of dependability

As Guba (1981) suggested this criterion should be used in interpretivist research instead of the criterion of reliability in the positivist paradigm. This criterion is concerned with the ability of observing the same outcome or findings under similar circumstances. As argued by Guba and Lincoln (1989), because the interpretivist researcher is studying human behaviour, which is continuously changing, contextual and subject to multiple interpretations of reality, it is not possible to reproduce the exact findings of a study. The researcher can make inferences, which are influenced by the researcher's own construction of meaning (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). The inferences and interpretations are dependable on the researcher's ability and skills to ensure that the findings truly emerge from the data gathered and analysed for the research (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, p.34). In this research, I used my reflexivity to ensure that the findings did indeed emerge from the data and were reflective of the data, thus enhancing the dependability and reliability.

4.8.4 The criterion of confirmability

Confirmability is the qualitative parallel to objectivity. As objectivity means that the influence of the researcher's judgement is minimised, confirmability means that the data and interpretations made by the researcher are not figments of their imagination (Mertens 2019). In this study qualitative data was tracked to its source and the ideas used to interpret the data were made explicit and the process of synthesizing the data to reach conclusions was confirmed. A 'chain of evidence' was provided in this study (Yin 2018) through an audit trail, which documented data analysis decisions and activities (Appendices 19-29). The use of software, such as Microsoft Excel (Phase One) and NVivo 12 (Phase Two) acted as tools for transparency and allowed for the creation of an audit trail of the analytical processes utilised and the decisions made (Woods *et al.* 2016). The resulting appendices (Appendices 19-29) illustrate this auditability and contribute to this criterion of confirmability.

4.9 Reflexivity and Authorial Stance of the Researcher

This research was situated within an interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm holds a basic assumption that knowledge is socially constructed by people who are active in the research process (Mertens 2019) and that the researchers should try to comprehend the ‘complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it’ (Schwandt 1994, p.118). Mertens (2019) notes that the interpretivist paradigm emphasises that research is a product of the values of those conducting the research and cannot be independent of them. The ontological stance of this research implies that ‘reality is socially constructed’ (Mertens 2019, p.18) and therefore, the researcher was aware that multiple mental constructions could be drawn upon, some that may be in conflict with others and that the perceptions of reality could change throughout the research process. Interpretivists adapt a relativist ontology in which a single phenomenon has multiple interpretations of reality rather than a truth, which is determined by a process of measurement (Pham 2018). As a qualitative researcher, ‘the researcher is the instrument for data collection’ (Mertens 2019, p.272) and it is the researcher that decides what questions to ask, how to ask them, and how to report it. It is for this reason that there is significant interest focused on who the researcher is, and what values, assumptions, beliefs, or biases she brings to the study (Mertens 2019). The nature of qualitative research was reflected upon at every stage of the research knowing that the researcher was the main instrument in the collection of data. It is crucial to acknowledge the ‘I’ in the study. I am a primary school teacher, with over thirteen years’ experience working as a SET in a SEN team, a position I currently hold. I am also a part-time lecturer in inclusive special education. My interest in this research has developed from my background, experiences, and studies, which have undoubtedly influenced my approach to this research. Reflexivity has been given considerable attention throughout this study, which involved me reflecting on and in making my position as a researcher, SET, teacher educator and a practitioner explicit (Lincoln and Guba 2000). The literature recognises the importance of ‘researchers reflecting on their own values, assumptions, beliefs, and biases and monitoring those as they progress through the study (perhaps through journaling or peer debriefing) to determine their impact on the study’s data and interpretations’ (Mertens 2019, p.272). Within this paradigm researcher reflexivity is a medium that supports interpretation (Finlay 2002).

Reflexivity involves the researcher engaging in a ‘process of continual dialogue and critical self-evaluation’ (Berger 2015, p.220) and a recognition that her role and position may influence the research process or outcome. This process is acknowledged in the literature as a means of transparency (Stake 1995; Finlay 2002; Creswell 2012). As suggested by Creswell and Miller (2000) reflexivity was undertaken from the beginning of the research process through using a reflective research diary. Utilising this diary allowed me to maintain objectivity and acknowledge my personal values, beliefs and biases to myself and readers alike (Ortlipp 2008) (examples of excerpts from my research diary can be seen in Appendices 30 and 31). The research diary allowed for documentation of the thinking processes and the changes made when developing the research questions and throughout the research processes during data collection and analysis. The diary gave rise to opportunities to reflect and overcome potential or personal biases, as I was the sole researcher. Reflections that were recorded digitally using software during the analysis (annotations) allowed for the contextualisation of responses of the participants and provided richer insights than using the transcriptions alone (McNiff *et al.* 2009). In addition, I engaged in elements of peer debriefing with my supervisor throughout the research journey to minimise any potential influence from any personal biases.

4.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Mary Immaculate College Research Committee on October 6th 2022. (Reference A22-045; Appendix 1). Data storage followed the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy and MIC’s Record Retention Schedule.

With regard to ethical considerations, it is important for the researcher to demonstrate best ethical conduct by showing an appreciation of ‘what is right and wrong behaviour’ as you conduct the research (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, p.28). The understanding that all humans have dignity and the right to make choices, which should be respected, underpins this consideration (Kivunja and Kuyini (2017). Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) advocate in their research to uphold four key principles with regard to the implementation of ethical considerations. These principles are

detailed below (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017) and adhere to the acronym PAPA (privacy, accuracy, property and accessibility).

Privacy: The principle of privacy refers to the researcher's consideration of what information participants will be required to reveal to the research or to others about themselves, their organisation and their associations. The conditions and safeguarding under which the data is gathered and analysed is also considered. It is concerned with what information a participant does not have to share or would be forced to reveal to the researcher.

Accuracy: This principle is concerned with the responsibility of information and who is responsible for the accuracy, fidelity, and the authenticity of information. In ensuring the researcher has recorded the information accurately, this principle considers how the researcher cross-checks with participants in order for them to know what has been recorded is accurate.

Property: The ownership of the data is examined and also ownership of the avenues of how information is disseminated in any publications or through the media.

Accessibility: The accessibility to the data is considered, in that who has access to, how the data is kept safe and secure, what the conditions and safeguards are for researchers and participants regarding accessing the data and how will such access be gained.

The above ethical considerations begin at the start of the planning stages of the research (Robson 2011). Ethical issues can be anticipated at the proposal stage of the research and the researcher can plan in advance of the commencement of the study (Creswell 2009). Mertens (2019) suggests that ethical considerations can take place when writing the research problem, purpose and research questions. The research problem must, from an ethical standpoint, outline an issue that will benefit the participants and this issue needs to be understood clearly by participants, which is usually explained using a cover letter (Creswell 2009). The participants in Phase One electronically gave consent before completing the survey once they read the participant information sheet, which explicitly detailed the protection of the participant's rights as prepared by the researcher (Creswell 2013). The information sheet and consent form for Phase One were built into the online survey on Qualtrics. For Phase Two participants read the participant information sheets prior to the online

interview and verbally gave their consent after the informed consent statements were read, which was recorded in the transcription of the interview. Within the consent forms and participant information sheets, the purpose of the study was outlined as was the fact that participation was voluntary and that the participants could withdraw at any time. The level and type of participant involvement, guarantees of confidentiality, anonymity and the researchers contact details were included (Braun and Clarke 2013). In Phase Two these forms were distributed to the participants a minimum of one week before the interviews. When recruiting participants for Phase Two care was taken to ensure that SENCOs and Principals were not working together to avoid tensions being created due to varying and conflicting views arising from the research process. This was done to avoid compromising relationships within the school setting as any conflicting viewpoints or issues could not be solved by the researcher or the participants during the research process. Within the data collection phase of the research certain ethical considerations are required. As mentioned above the principle of accuracy was considered as participants in the research were provided with opportunities to review and amend their own data following the interviews. Birt *et al.* (2016) highlight that within an interpretivist/constructivist epistemology member checking enables participants to reconstruct their narrative through deleting any views given that no longer represent their experiences or that represent them in a negative manner.

The risk of insider bias was minimum, as I was not connected to any of the participants (Creswell 2009). Throughout the research, I ensured that confidentiality and anonymity were at the forefront of the researcher's mind. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) recommend I outlined to the participants that confidentiality would be assured. I also guaranteed individual anonymity as evident in the participant's information sheets. The names of participants were changed and any characteristics that may expose their identity were eliminated. Within the data analysis (thematic analysis) anonymity was addressed by focusing on key themes as opposed to individual cases.

Finally, access to written and electronic information was only permitted to the researcher and was kept strictly confidential. Aligning to the principle of 'property' any excerpts for the data gathered during the research will not identify names or characteristics during the dissemination process, such as publications. Electronic data

collected were stored securely on a password-protected computer. Hard-copy data were stored in a locked press during the research process.

4.11 Limitations

Although every effort was made to establish the credibility, quality and rigour of this research, as outlined in the previous sections, certain limitations remained and are detailed in this section.

The first limitation relates to researcher bias. As a SET and as evident in my authorial stance, I did not claim to be independent or distanced from the research. My background, experience, values and beliefs have shaped my approach to this research and potentially influenced my interpretations of the data. However, I took measures to minimise any potential bias throughout the study, as detailed in Section 4.9. In addition, at the start of this research journey I also reflected on my own position and noted that not being a SENCO allowed me to adopt a more objective stance towards the research process. I noted in my research diary as follows:

As I am not a SENCO myself, I think this may enable me to be more objective in my examination of the SENCO role in Ireland.

(SG Research Diary, 15/10/20)

Within the Phase One sample there was an unequal gender representation evident (Females: 91.6%; Males: 8.4%). As all primary schools in Ireland were emailed the researcher could not control for this unequal representation. The higher female representation is possibly reflective of the high national female to male teacher ratio. The average percentage of female teachers in Irish primary schools between 2008 and 2017 was 85.5% (Central Statistics Office 2024). This lack of male respondents did not allow for a male v female analysis in Phase One. However, this was not a focus of this research specifically and therefore would not have impacted on the credibility, validity or reliability of the findings. In addition, 33% of the participants in Phase Two were males and therefore the perspectives of this cohort were captured during this aspect of the research.

This research advanced our knowledge of the SENCO role by exploring the perspectives of additional members of the school microsystem, namely Principals and

SENCO Principals. However, other key members of the microsystem, such as pupils and parents/ guardians, were lacking. There was potential for pupil and parental voice to contribute to our understanding of the SENCO role and to assist with further triangulation through the use of multiple participants and perspectives. In addition, the inclusion of external professional services from the mesosystem and government departments from the macrosystem as participants would have allowed for additional perspectives on the SENCO role. While these additional perspectives are warranted, this research did advance our knowledge by including Principal voice and by incorporating a national large-scale survey of SENCOs in Irish primary schools. Future research should address these additional perspectives from pupils, parents, external professional services and government department, to further our knowledge of the realities faced by SENCOs in Ireland.

4.12 Conclusion

This chapter outlined a comprehensive account of the methodological approach that I adopted throughout this research journey. A mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was utilised within an interpretivist paradigm to address the research questions. Data collection and data analysis procedures were outlined along with the rationale describing their appropriateness. Ethical considerations and important issues relating to the quality of the research were detailed. In summary, this chapter aimed to provide a description and rationale for the researcher's decisions and actions involved in this study in order to attain the desired data from the SENCO population in Irish mainstream primary schools. The findings derived from both phases of the research are presented in Chapters Five and Six and the integration and interpretation of these findings are discussed in Chapter Seven.

CHAPTER FIVE: PHASE ONE FINDINGS

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, the findings from phase one of this research are detailed. The overarching aim of the research together with the research questions, listed in Table 5.1, provided the structure for the analysis and presentation of the findings. A mixed method approach was taken to this phase (QUAN +qual) and the quantitative data, presented in the form of descriptive statistics, graphs and tables, is integrated with thematic analysis of the SENCOs' qualitative comments to open-ended questions. Prior to the presentation of data relevant to each research question an overview of the context of the SENCOs' schools is provided.

Table 5.1: Research questions and related sections.

Research Question	Related Section
What are the demographics and profile of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?	5.2
What are the roles and responsibilities that SENCOs In Irish mainstream primary schools?	5.3, 5.4
What are the perceived enablers to enactment of the SENCO role?	5.5
What are the perceived barriers to enactment of the SENCO role?	5.6
What are the professional learning needs of SENCOs and supports needed to allow them to effectively enact their role?	5.7

5.1 School Context

For details on the School Demographics refer to Chapter Four, Section 4.5.1. In this section detail is provided on the SEN provision and staffing within the school's microsystem.

5.1.1 SEN staff

In Table 5.2, details pertaining to the number of SETs and SNAs in the schools are outlined. In this table the percentage of schools with different numbers of staff in each category are provided.

Table 5.2: Number of SETs and SNAs (full and part-time) working in the schools in relation to school size as indicated by the participating SENCOs.

School Size	Staff Number				
	0-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	Over 8
SETs (Full-Time)					
Under 100 Pupils	98.2%	0%	1.8%	0%	0%
100-200 Pupils	48.9%	29.5%	12.5%	8.0%	1.1%
200-300 Pupils	9.2%	57.5%	19.5%	4.6%	9.2%
300-400 Pupils	1.8%	23.2%	33.9%	17.9%	23.2%
Over 400 Pupils	0%	7.1%	22.6%	21.4%	47.6%
SETs (Part-Time)					
Under 100 Pupils	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
100-200 Pupils	98.9%	1.1%	0%	0%	0%
200-300 Pupils	98.9%	1.1%	0%	0%	0%
300-400 Pupils	96.4%	3.6%	0%	0%	0%
Over 400 Pupils	95.2%	3.6%	0%	0%	0%
SNAs (Full-Time)					
Under 100 Pupils	91.2%	7.0%	1.8%	0%	0%
100-200 Pupils	43.2%	21.6%	18.2%	9.1%	8.0%
200-300 Pupils	27.6%	20.7%	19.5%	20.7%	11.5%
300-400 Pupils	14.3%	26.8%	16.1%	10.7%	32.1%
Over 400 Pupils	3.6%	17.9%	19.0%	19.0%	39.3%
SNAs (Part-Time)					
Under 100 Pupils	96.5%	1.8%	1.8%	0%	0%
100-200 Pupils	93.2%	4.5%	2.3%	0%	0%
200-300 Pupils	95.4%	3.4%	1.1%	0%	0%
300-400 Pupils	83.9%	10.7%	3.6%	1.8%	0%
Over 400 Pupils	89.3%	4.8%	3.6%	0%	1.2%

Regarding the number of special class teachers, 59.9% of schools had no special class teacher, 14.3% had 1 special class teacher, 19.7% had 2 special class teachers, 5.7%

had 3 special class teachers and 3.5% had over 3 special class teachers. Only 24.5% of schools had a home school liaison teacher (75.8%). All of the 91 schools who had a home school liaison teacher had DEIS status.

5.1.2 SEN support teams

Most SENCOs indicated that there is a SEN support team in their school (81.7%). The findings related to the staff involved in these SEN support teams is provided in Table 5.3 below. For schools that had special class teachers, 58.1% (n=93) indicated that the special class teachers was part of the SEN support teams. Regarding schools that had a home school liaison officer, only 38.5% (n=35) of these indicated that this teacher is involved in the SEN support teams.

Table 5.3: Staff involved in the SEN support teams in the schools as indicated by the participating SENCOs.

Staff Type	Yes	No
SENCO	85.7%	14.3%
SETs	93.3%	6.7%
Class Teachers	46.6%	53.4%
SNA	52.6%	47.4%
Principal	75.7%	24.3%
Deputy Principal	65.5%	34.5%

For the 14.8% of participants that reported that the SENCO was not part of the SEN support team, the majority of these (58.5%, n=31) were Principals or Deputy Principals. In addition, 21 of these SENCOs were in schools with under 100 pupils (39.6%), 16 were in schools with 100-200 pupils (30.2%), 12 were in schools with 200-300 pupils (22.6%), and the remaining 4 participants were in the larger schools (0.08%). These SEN support teams meet daily for 3.2% of the respondents, 18.3% meet weekly, and 33.7% meet monthly. The remaining 44.7% of respondents selected 'Other' for this question on how often the SEN support team meet. The responses to 'Other' included the following as examples: 'fortnightly'; 'no specific meetings'; 'informally on daily basis and during Croke Park'; 'once a term'; 'twice a term'; 'twice a year'; 'as needed'; 'regularly meet informally'; 'at intervals depending on matters

arising'; 'every 6-8 weeks'; 'mostly meet informally'; 'when time permits'; and 'start of each term'. The majority of SENCOs (66.9%) indicated that this meeting is part of the teachers' expected working hours. Outside of these meetings, 69.5% of SENCOs reported that there are systems/ procedures in their schools for collaboration between SEN staff and class teachers.

5.1.3 SEN provision

In Figure 5.1 the findings related to the percentage of pupils in receipt of SEN support, i.e. pupils that have a school support or school support plus plan, in the schools are detailed. Approximately 35% of respondents indicated that between 21-30% of the pupil population were in receipt of SEN support with a further 22.1% indicating that 31-40% of pupils received such support.

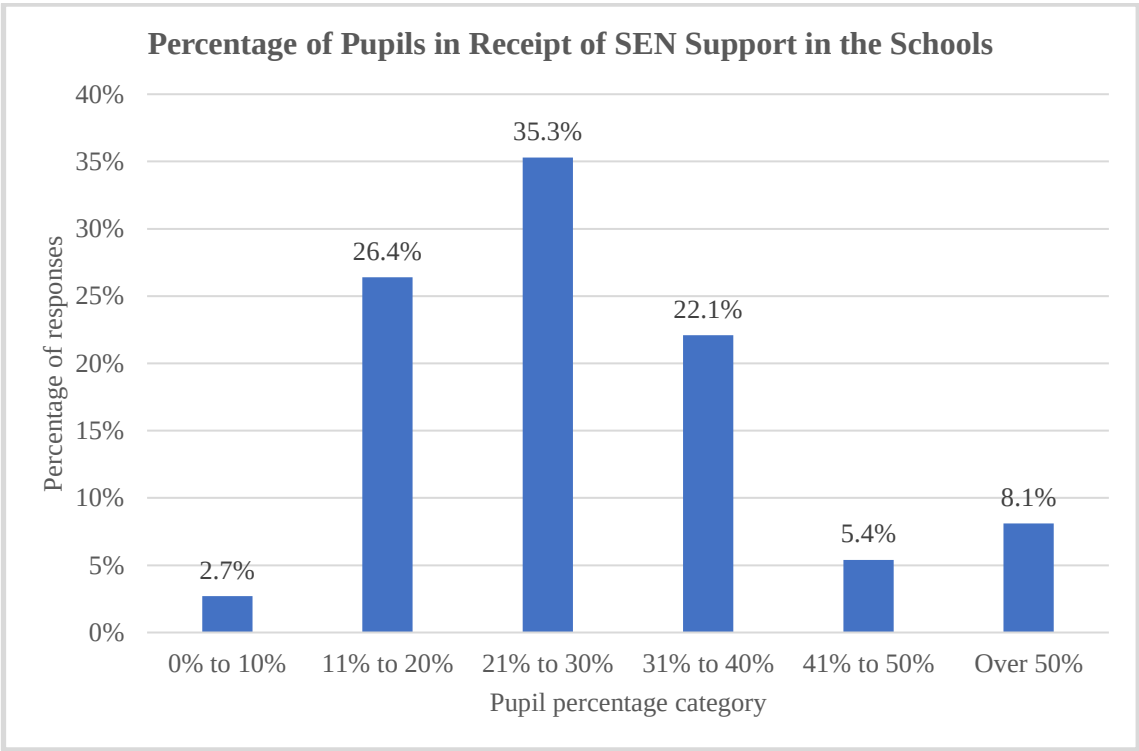


Figure 5.1: Percentage of pupils in receipt of SEN support in the schools as indicated by the SENCOs.

For 97% of the SENCOs there is a written policy on provision for pupils with SEN in their schools and 72.8% indicated their school 'always' applies the Continuum of Support to organise SEN provision. In addition, 24.8% indicated that they use the

Continuum of Support ‘most of the time’, while the remaining 2.4% of respondents indicated that their school ‘sometimes’ uses the Continuum of Support to organise SEN provision. Regarding procedures for determining how long SEN support is provided in the schools, 69.8% of SENCOs indicated that such procedures exist in their schools. In Table 5.4, the findings pertaining to the procedures used in the schools to identify pupils that need additional support are provided. The participants were asked to tick all that applied and the procedures with the highest percentage of Yes responses were ‘external professional reports’ and ‘below a set percentile on in-school standardised tests’.

Table 5.4: Findings related to the procedures used to identify pupils that need additional supports. Percentage of schools that do and do not use the procedures.

Procedure	Yes	No
Below a set percentile on in-school standardised tests	98.7%	1.3%
Recommendation of class teacher	95.2%	4.8%
Class based test	89.8%	10.2%
External professional report (e.g. psychologist, OT, SLT)	99.2%	0.8%
Special education teacher’s assessment	92.2%	7.8%
Pre-school report on transition	78.7%	21.3%
Parental/ Guardian concern	84.9%	15.1%

The findings related to who makes the decision on when support is terminated is provided in Figure 5.2. The responses for ‘Other’ included the following; ‘combination of professionals’; ‘collaborative review’; ‘criteria specified in the SEN policy’; and ‘school and home’.

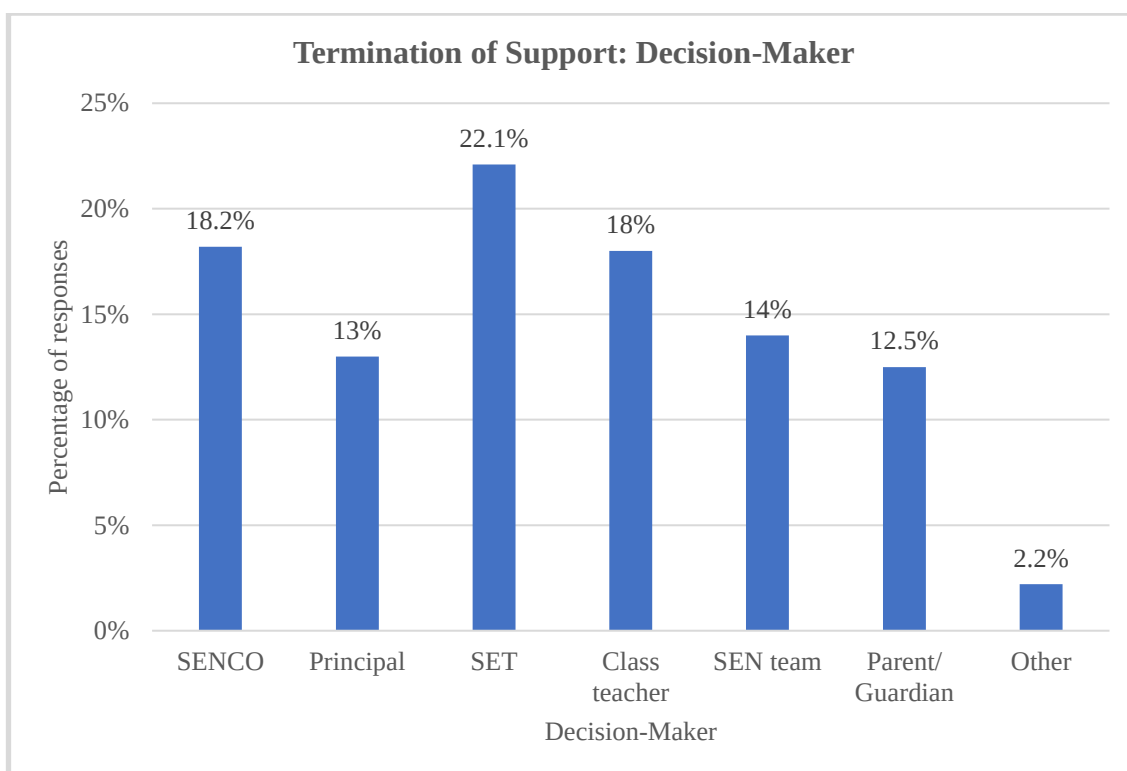


Figure 5.2: Findings related to who makes the decision on when support is terminated.

All of the SENCOs (100%) indicated that their school devises Student School Plans for pupils with additional needs. The findings related to who is involved in devising these plans is detailed in Table 5.5 below.

Table 5.5: Findings related to staff involved in devising Student School Plans in the schools as indicated by the SENCOs.

Staff Type	Yes	No
Class Teacher	96%	4%
SET	99.7%	0.3%
Special Class Teacher	42.9%	57.1%
Parent/ Guardian	93.3%	6.7%
SENCO	69.5%	30.5%
Pupil	64.4%	35.6%
SNA	67.9%	32.1%
Principal	44.2%	55.8%
Psychologist	56.1%	43.9%

Occupational Therapist	48.3%	51.7%
Speech and Language Therapist	46.4%	53.6%
Visiting Teacher	23.5%	76.5%

Of interest in these results from Table 5.5, is that having a special class does not result in a higher percentage of external agency staff (psychologist, occupational therapist, speech and language therapist) being involved in this process. For schools with special classes, 52.3% indicated that a psychologist was involved in this process while this percentage was 41.3% and 24.5% for occupational therapists and speech and language therapists respectively. The percentage of schools with a special class who indicated that the visiting teacher was involved in this process was 43.2%.

In Table 5.6, findings related to the type of SEN provision are detailed. The SENCOs were asked to rate the top 4 most frequently used types with 1 being 'most frequently used' and 4 being 'least frequently used'. The mean responses are provided in Table 7 and it is evident from the table that the most frequently used type of SEN provision was 'withdrawal for group instruction' followed by 'in-class teaching', which includes team-teaching and station teaching, and then by 'withdrawal for individual instruction'.

Table 5.6: Mean responses with standard deviation on the type of SEN provision in the SENCOs' schools.

Type of SEN Provision	Mean Response	Standard Deviation
Withdrawal for group instruction	1.65	0.81
In-class teaching	2.20	0.94
Withdrawal for individual instruction	2.49	0.84
Special class full-time	2.87	1.22
Special class part-time, mainstream class part-time	3.38	0.88
Other*	3.68	0.89
Occasional advice from SET	3.83	0.52
Support of visiting teacher	3.88	0.32

*Other included team teaching, station-teaching, and mixture of in-class and withdrawal.

5.2 SENCO Demographics: What are the demographics and profile of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?

In this section findings are provided that relate to the SENCOs' demographics and to the first research question *What are the demographics and profile of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?* In total, 91.6% of the SENCOs who participated in Phase One were female with the remaining 8.4% being male. The findings in relation to the experience of the SENCOs is provided in Figure 5.3 below. It is evident from this Figure that the majority of SENCOs had over 21 years' teaching experience and had 5 or less years' experience in the SENCO role. The SENCOs were experienced teachers and the limited SENCO role experience could potentially be due to the emerging nature of the role in the primary school setting.

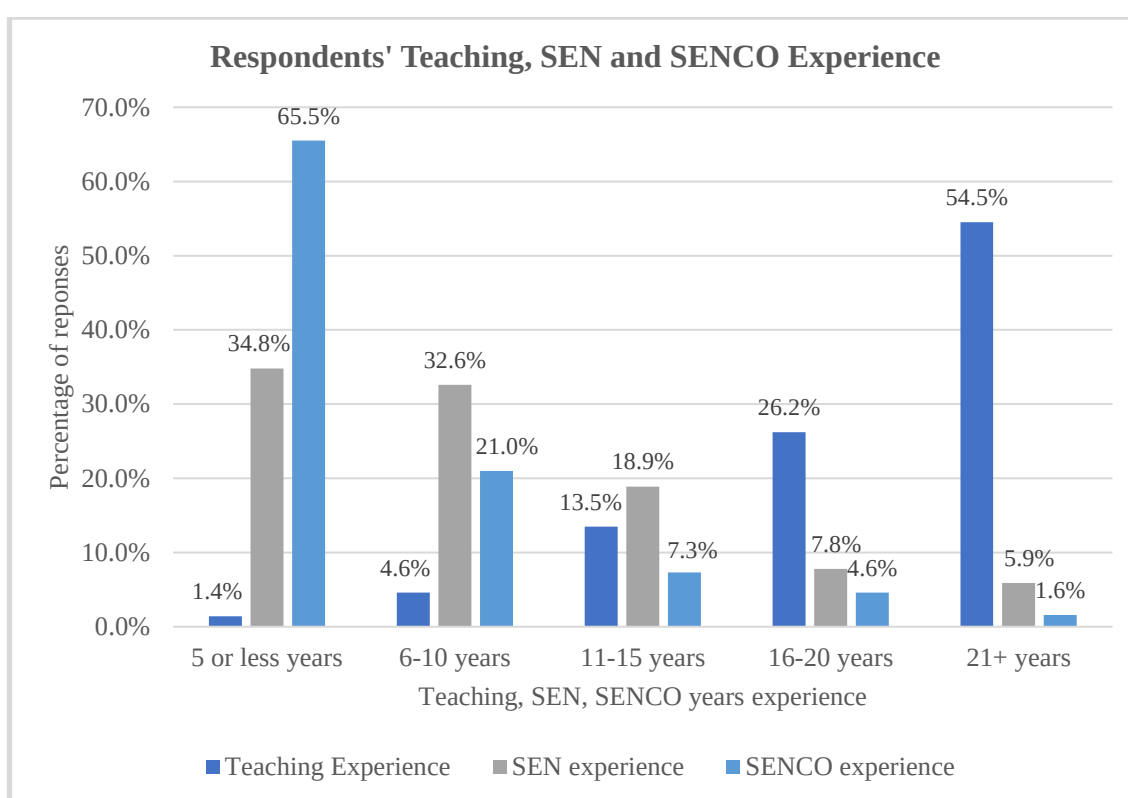
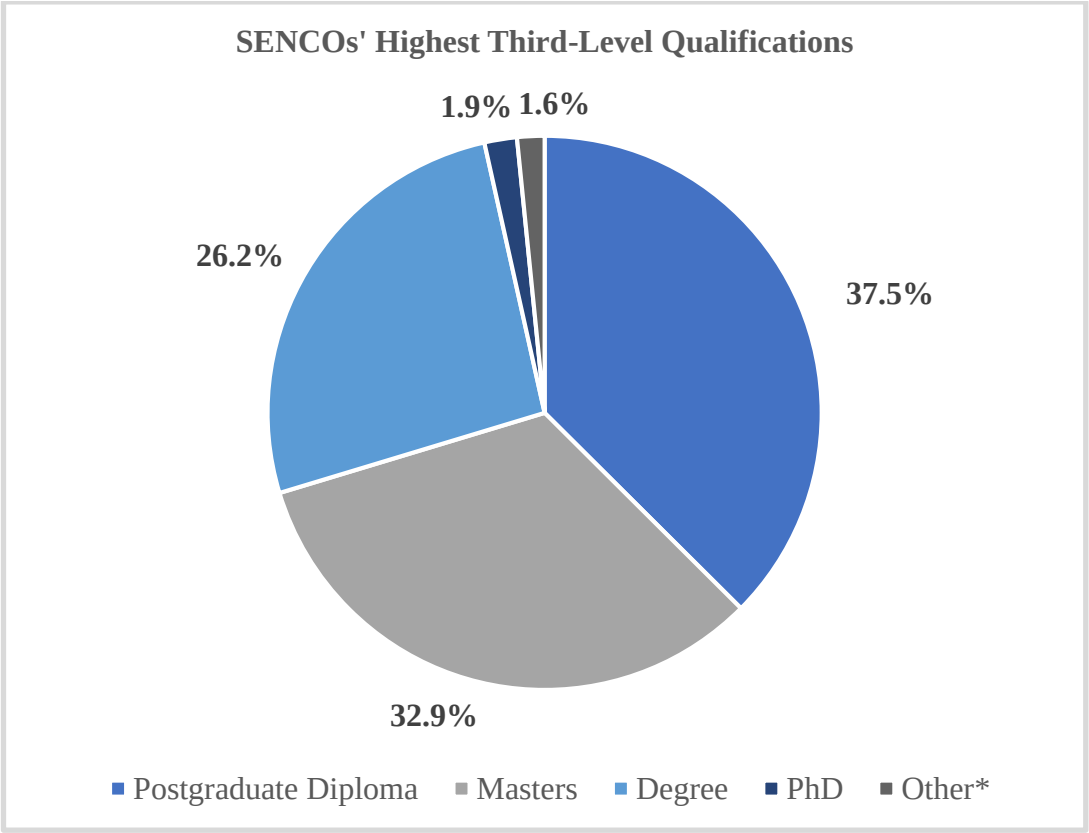


Figure 5.3: Number of years teaching, SEN and SENCO experience as indicated by the participating SENCOs. Percentage of responses in each year category.

The SENCOs were asked about their general and special education specific third-level qualifications. In Figure 5.4, the findings related to the SENCOs' highest general third-level qualifications are displayed where it is evident that the most

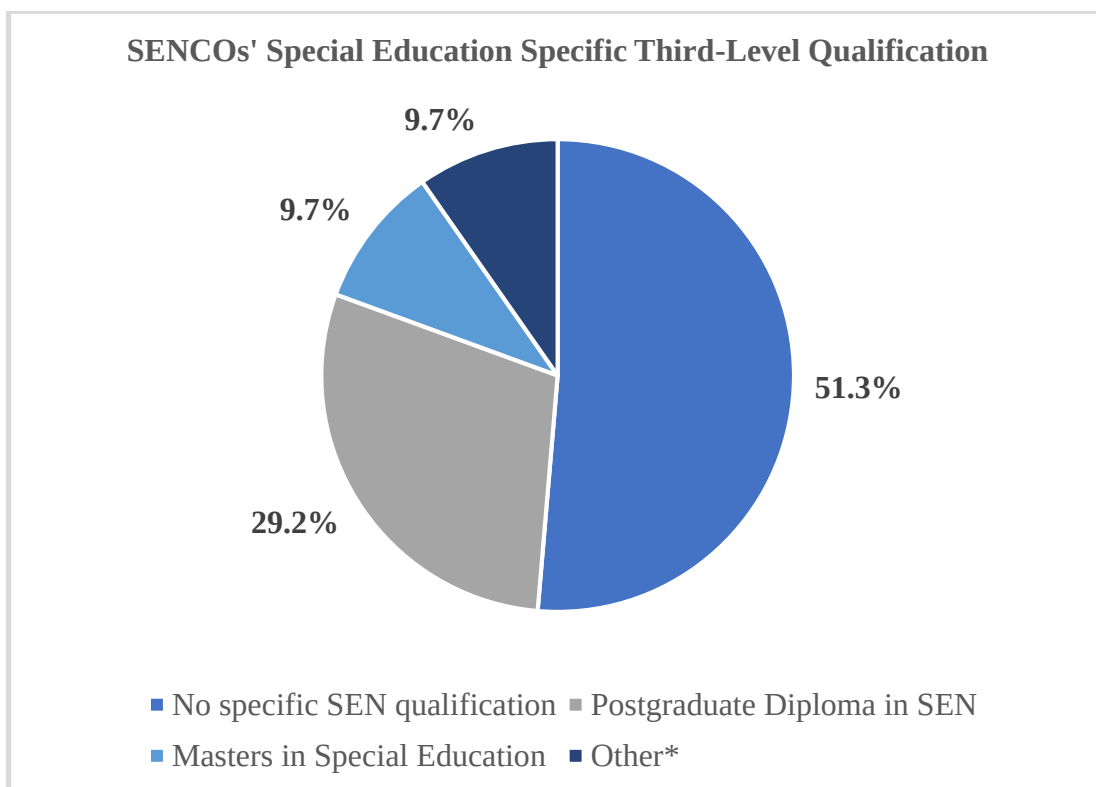
common qualification is a postgraduate diploma (37.5%). In total, in excess of two-thirds of respondents (72.3%) held a postgraduate qualification of some sort.



*Other: included 'postgrad certificate' and others who are currently studying for a Master's.

Figure 5.4: SENCO's highest third-level qualification in general.

Regarding special education specific third-level qualifications, Figure 5.5 presents the findings related to this. It is evident from this Figure that the majority of SENCOs do not have a special education specific third-level qualification (51.3%).



*Other: included 'certificates', 'postgraduate diploma in leadership', 'postgrad in play therapy', 'reading recovery training', 'dip in learning support', 'MSc ASD', and 'postgrad in educational leadership and management'

Figure 5.5: SENCOs' special education specific third-level qualifications.

The 114 SENCOs who completed the Postgraduate Diploma in Special Education were asked if they felt this postgraduate diploma prepared them for the SENCO role and the findings are reported in Figure 5.6. The majority indicated that they felt it did prepare them for this role.

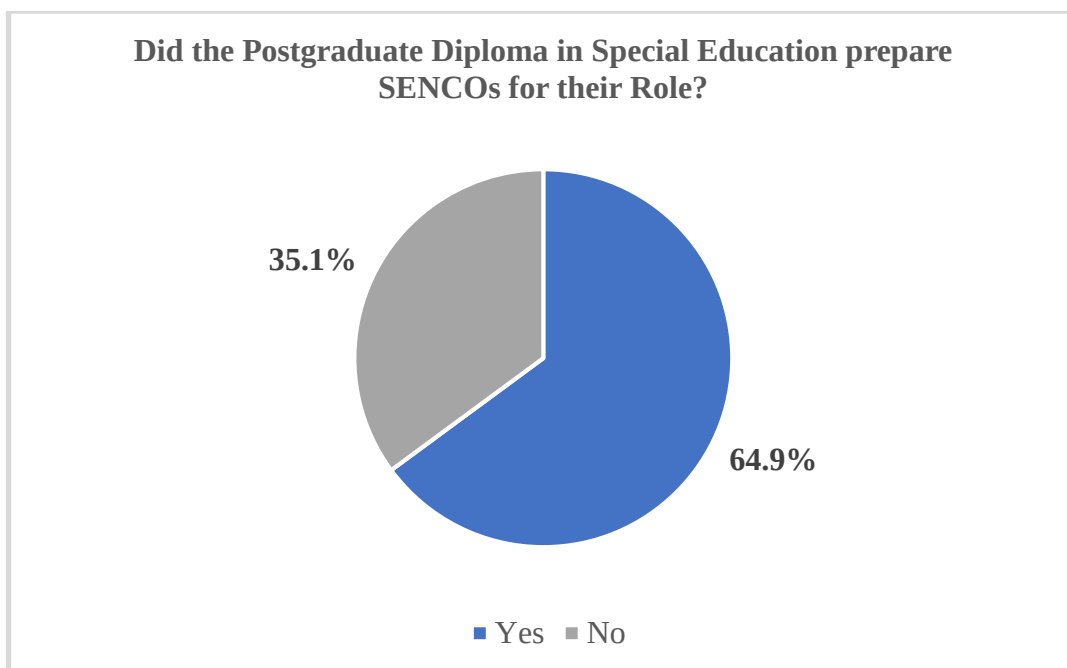


Figure 5.6: SENCOs who completed Postgraduate Diploma in Special Education responses to whether the qualification prepared them for the SENCO role.

The SENCOs were also asked if they were part of a community of practice relevant to the SENCO role and the findings are displayed in Figure 5.7. This Figure reports that the majority of SENCOs were not part of a community of practice.

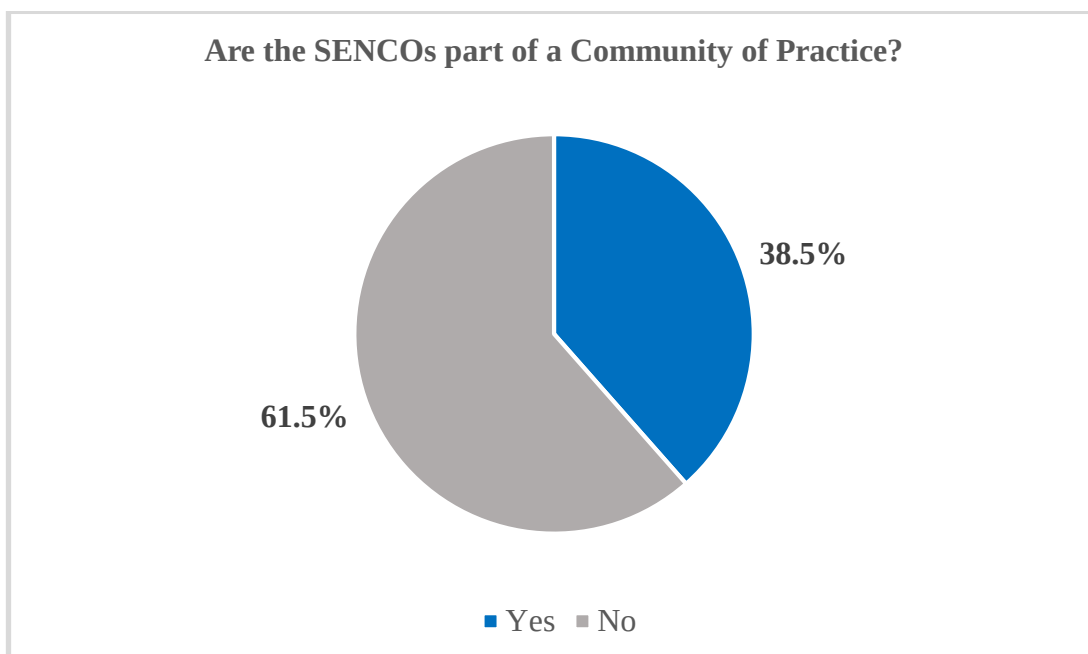
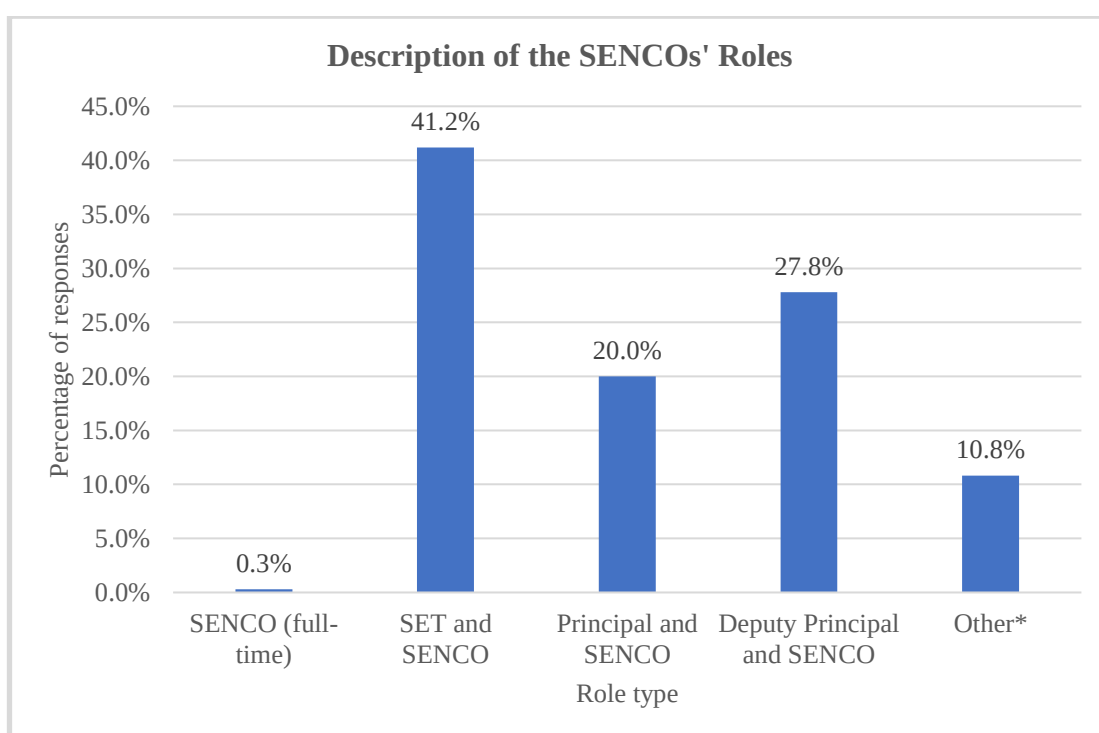


Figure 5.7: Findings related to SENCOs' membership of communities of practice.

Of the 143 SENCOs (38.5%) who were part of a SENCO related community of practice, 24.5% indicated that the format used for these meetings is face-to-face while 37.8% said that an online format is employed. The remaining 37.8% of the 148 SENCOs reported that a blended approach is used for their community of practice meetings.

In Figure 5.8, the findings related to the SENCOs' description of their current role is provided. The SENCOs were asked if they were a full-time SENCO, SET and SENCO, Principal and SENCO, or Deputy Principal and SENCO. The percentage of responses in each category are provided in this table and show that the most common category was the SET and SENCO category. It is noteworthy that only one respondent was a full-time SENCO.



*Other included; 'SET, SENCO & DP' (n=14), 'Special class teacher & SENCO' (n=3), 'Teacher, DP and SENCO' (n=2), 'Principal, SET & SENCO' (n=2), 'DP, Special class teacher & SENCO' (n=2).

Figure 5.8: Description of the SENCOs' role. Percentage of responses in each category.

The SENCOs were asked if they held a post of responsibility to coordinate special education provision in their schools and the findings pertaining to this can be

seen in Figure 5.9 below, where it is evident that a majority of SENCOs do hold a post of responsibility related to special education provision in their school (72.8%).

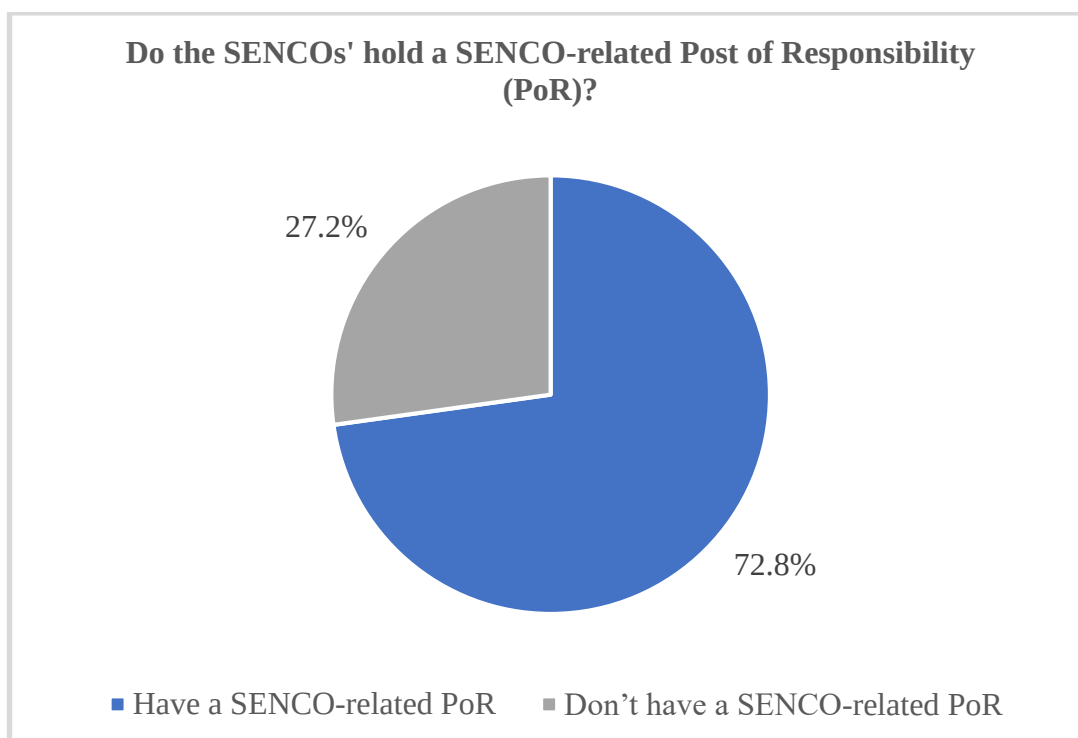


Figure 5.9: Findings related to whether the SENCOs' have a post of responsibility related to special education provision in their schools.

Of the 270 SENCOs, however, who indicated that they held a post of responsibility for special education, only 17.0% reported that this post of responsibility is a full post of responsibility related to their SENCO duties and the coordination of special education provision. The remaining 83.0% said that their SENCO duties form part of a post of responsibility with other responsibilities. In Figure 5.10, the findings related to the type of post of responsibility that these 270 SENCOs hold are provided. The most common post of responsibility held by these SENCOs was deputy principal. Over half of the SENCOs (56.7%) with a post of responsibility were senior leaders (i.e. principals or deputy principals), which indicates that the position is now occupied in the main by those in senior leadership positions.

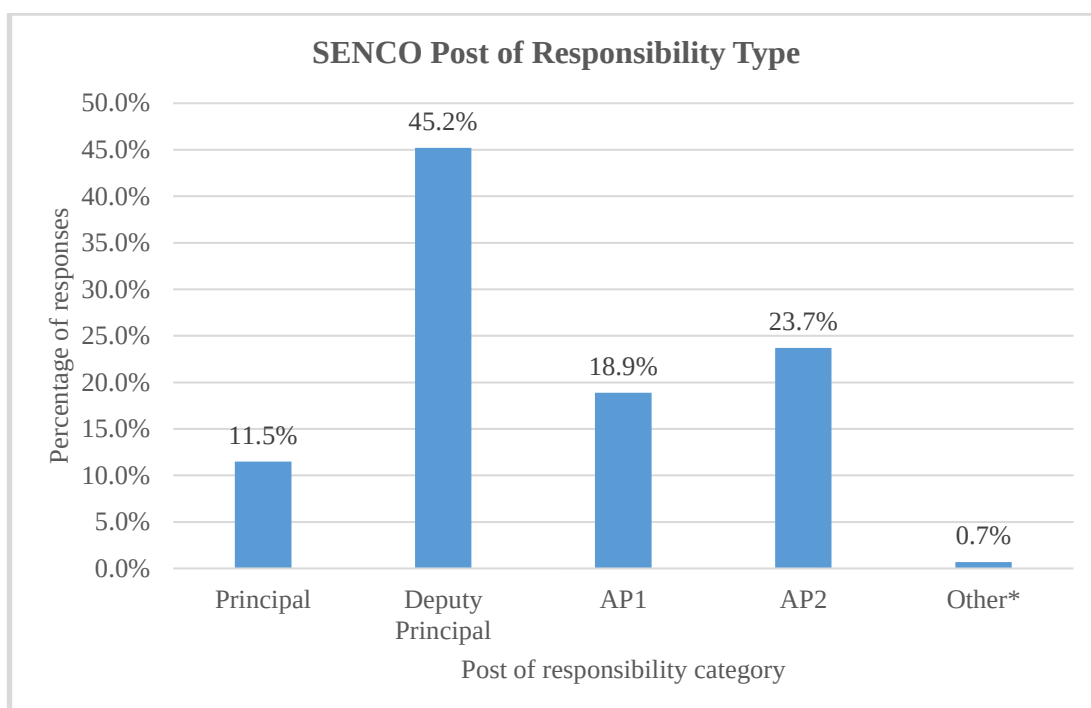


Figure 5.10: Type of post of responsibility held by the 270 SENCOs with such a post. Percentage of responses for each category. *Other includes Acting DP.

Inferential statistics were conducted to assess if holding a post of responsibility impacted on aspects of the SENCO role and the SENCOs' responses. The Chi-square test reported a number of statistically significant results regarding whether the SENCO held a post of responsibility related to the SENCO role. School size was significantly associated with the SENCO holding a post of responsibility ($\chi^2_4 = 42.43$, $p < 0.001$). The majority of SENCOs without a post of responsibility were in schools with smaller pupil numbers (under 100 pupils = 29.7%, 100-200 pupils = 30.7%), while 27.4% of SENCOs with a post of responsibility were in schools with over 400 pupils. DEIS status was not significantly associated with the SENCO having a post of responsibility ($\chi^2_1 = 0.07$, $p = 0.799$). Similarly, the number of pupils with SEN in the school had no significant association with the SENCO post of responsibility status ($\chi^2_5 = 8.81$, $p = 0.117$).

The analysis also reported that there is a significant association between post of responsibility status and systems for collaboration between SEN teachers and class teachers ($\chi^2_1 = 4.36$, $p = 0.037$). For SENCOs with a post of responsibility, 72.6% indicated that there were such systems for collaboration in their schools, while this percentage was lower for those without a post of responsibility (61.4%). Such a

significant association was also evident between post of responsibility status and whether there was a SEN support team in the school ($\chi^2_1 = 14.17$, $p < 0.001$). The majority of SENCOs with a post of responsibility (86.3%) had SEN support teams in their schools and the percentage for those without such a post was lower at 69.3%.

In summary, the key findings related to this section's research question, namely *What are the demographics and profile of SENCOs in Irish primary schools?* are as follows:

- Majority of SENCOs have 21+ years' teaching experience and less than 5 years' SENCO experience.
- The most common highest third-level qualification in general held by the SENCOs is postgraduate diploma.
- The majority of SENCOs do not have a special education specific third-level qualification.
- The most common description of the participants' role was SET and SENCO.
- While the majority of SENCOs had a post of responsibility related to their SENCO duties, this post was only a full-time special education related post for 17% of SENCOs.
- Post of responsibility status is significantly associated with school size but not significantly associated with DEIS status or the percentage of pupils who require SEN support in the schools.

5.3 SENCO Role: What are the roles and responsibilities of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?

This section addresses the second research questions and provides some insight into how the SENCOs perceive their role. Specifically, findings are detailed regarding *What are the roles and responsibilities of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?* The respondents were asked to rate the importance of various roles and responsibilities and the mean and median responses are detailed in Table 5.7. In this rating, 1 equated to 'very important' and 5 equated to 'not important at all'. The role and responsibility that was deemed the most important was 'leading and implementing whole-school SEN initiatives and interventions', followed by 'identifying pupils with

additional needs’ and then ‘co-ordinating the SEN team’. Interestingly the responsibility ‘advocating on behalf of students’ was rated highly with an average rating of 1.27 which implies that the SENCOs felt that this was a very important role and points to them potentially acting as ‘advocacy leaders’ ensuring that pupils with SEN are not marginalised within the schools’ microsystems. Of the 25 listed roles and responsibilities, 24 had a rating between 1 (very important) and 2 (important) which may be reflective of the extensive role of the SENCO and their related responsibilities.

Table 5.7: Mean (with standard deviation) and median responses for the SENCOs’ rating of the importance of SENCO roles and responsibilities. 1=very important, 5=not important at all.

Roles and Responsibilities	Responses		
	Mean	SD	Median
Leading and implementing whole-school SEN initiatives and interventions	1.22	0.47	1
Identifying pupils with additional needs	1.25	0.55	1
Co-ordinating the SEN team	1.26	0.60	1
Advocating on behalf of students	1.27	0.53	1
Collaborating with class teachers	1.28	0.51	1
Timetabling SEN support	1.32	0.58	1
Leading and developing SEN plan, policies and procedures	1.36	0.55	1
Monitoring of pupil progress and determining length of support provision	1.36	0.60	1
Liaising and collaborating with outside agencies	1.39	0.59	1
Developing and co-ordinating the Student Support Plan process	1.39	0.58	1
Liaising with parents	1.43	0.65	1
Applying for resources, e.g. SET allocations, SNA allocations	1.49	0.79	1
Collaborating and meeting with the Senior Leadership Team	1.51	0.72	1
Supporting and co-ordinating pupils’ transitions to and from primary school	1.54	0.71	1
Arranging standardised tests, diagnostic tests and/ or cognitive assessments	1.56	0.70	1
Co-ordinating pupil records	1.61	0.70	1
Identifying and allocating SEN resources and materials	1.62	0.69	2

Supporting class teachers with Classroom Support Plans or Checklists	1.63	0.76	1
Co-ordinating and engaging in Student Support Plan meetings	1.64	0.77	1
Providing in-class support within mainstream class	1.64	0.86	1
Withdrawal of pupils for small group instruction	1.65	0.85	1
Directing the work of SNAs in the school	1.80	0.92	2
Withdrawal of pupils for individual instruction	1.81	0.98	2
Identifying relevant CPD and providing CPD to staff	1.89	0.82	2
Providing in-class support with special classes	2.59	1.49	2

In summary the key findings related to this section's research question, namely *What are the role and responsibilities of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?* are as follows:

- 'Leading and implementing whole-school SEN initiatives and interventions' was perceived as the most important SENCO role and responsibility.
- Of the 25 listed SENCO roles and responsibilities, 24 (96%) were perceived as between 'very important' or 'important' which could be viewed as indicative of the vast number of roles and responsibilities that the SENCO has to oversee.

5.4 SENCO Role and the Senior Leadership Team: What are the roles and responsibilities of the SENCO in Irish mainstream primary schools?

Findings related to the research question '*What are the roles and responsibilities of the SENCO in Irish mainstream primary schools?*' are detailed in this section. Specifically, findings are reported on the SENCOs' role of working with their school's Senior Leadership Team regarding the leadership and management of SEN provision. Overall, 89% of SENCOs indicated that they were part of the SLT in their school. Of these the majority (59.7%) were senior leaders, i.e. principals or deputy principals, and no senior leaders answered 'No' to this question. The SENCOs were asked to rate how closely the SLT works with the SEN team and the details are illustrated in Figure 5.11. In total, 64.7% of SENCOs indicated that the SLT works either 'very closely' or 'closely' with the SLT. The inferential statistical analysis sought to analyse whether

post of responsibility status was associated with this rating and the results indicated that there was no significant association between this status and how the SENCOs rated how closely they worked with the SLT ($\chi^2_4 = 4.28$, $p=0.396$). Essentially this indicates that there was no difference in responses here based on whether the SENCOs held a post of responsibility or not. For example, 41.5% of SENCOs with a post of responsibility indicated that they work ‘very closely’ with the SLT, while for SENCOs without such a post this figure was 44.6%. An analysis was done to compare the responses to this question for AP1 and AP2 post holders (categorised as Middle Leadership, SL) and Principals and Deputy Principals (categorised as Senior Leadership, SL). The inferential statistical analysis reported that there was a significant association between management level status for post holders and how they rated how closely they worked with the SLT ($\chi^2_2 = 8.557$, $p=0.014$). Specifically, these results indicated that 72.7% of SL SENCOs indicated that the senior leadership in the school works ‘very closely or closely’ with the SEN team, while this percentage was 56.0% for ML SENCOs.

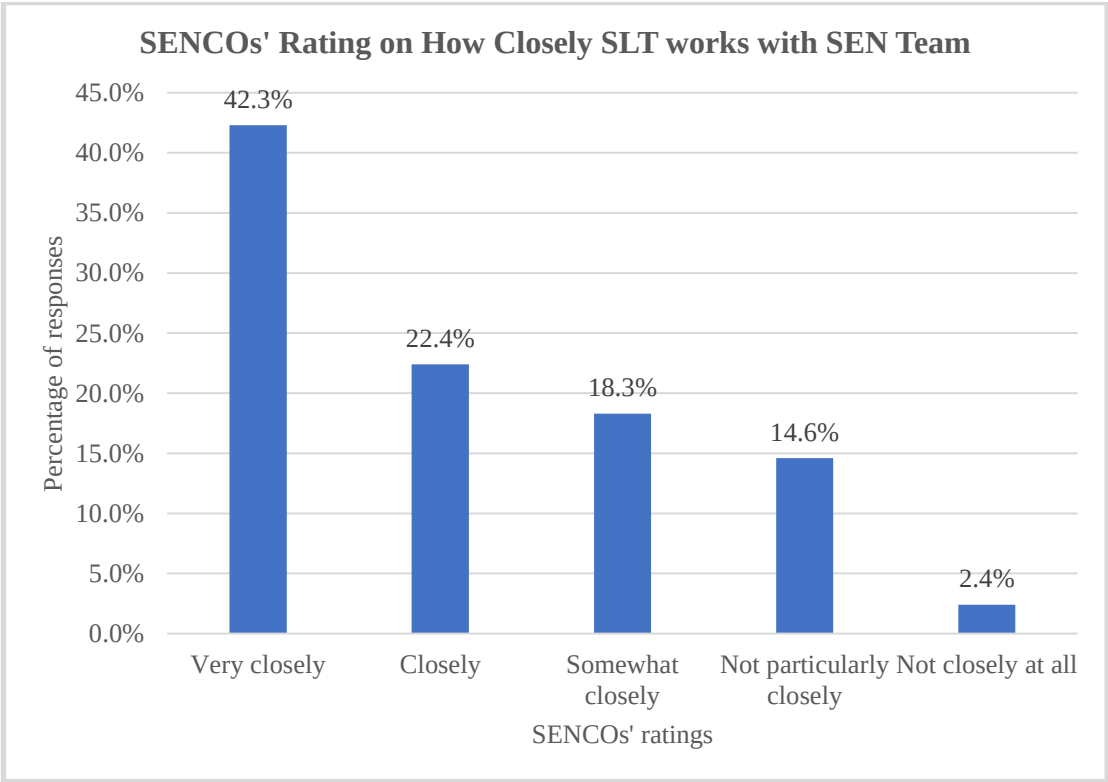


Figure 5.11: SENCOs’ rating of how closely the SLT works with the SEN team. Percentage of responses.

Specifically, the SENCOs' were asked to rate how closely they work with the SLT in undertaking various roles and responsibilities. The findings pertaining to this are detailed in Table 5.8 and include the mean and median responses (1='very closely, 5='not closely at all'). The responsibility with the lowest mean response was 'consulting and liaising with external agencies' (mean response = 2.02, which equates to the rating 'closely'). This was followed by 'Overseeing a whole-school approach to assessment and screening to identify needs and to guide the allocation of appropriate supports' (mean response = 2.06) and 'Ensuring that systems are in place for effective sharing of relevant information on students' needs with the SEN team and all teachers' (mean response = 2.06). The inferential statistical analysis sought to assess if holding a post of responsibility influenced the SENCOs' ratings on how closely they work with the SLT on these roles and responsibilities. Only one significant association was reported and this related to the role 'Facilitating the CPD of all teachers in relation to the education of pupils with SEN'. There was a significant association between post of responsibility status and the SENCOs' rating on how closely they work with the SLT on this task ($\chi^2_4 = 12.518$, $p=0.014$). A higher percentage of SENCOs with a post of responsibility work 'very closely' with the SLT on this task (25.9% for SENCOs with a post versus 20.8% without a post). For the category 'not closely at all', the percentage rating of SENCOs without a post of responsibility was 15.8% and this percentage rating was lower for SENCOs with a post of responsibility at 5.2%.

Table 5.8: SENCOs' ratings on how closely they work with the SLT on various roles and responsibilities. Mean (with standard deviation) and median responses (1='very closely', 5='not closely at all') are provided.

Roles and Responsibilities	Responses		
	Mean	SD	Median
Consulting and liaising with relevant external bodies and agencies, such as NEPS	2.02	1.26	2
Overseeing a whole-school approach to assessment and screening to identify needs and to guide the allocation of appropriate supports	2.06	1.20	2

Ensuring that systems are in place for effective sharing of relevant information on students' needs with the SEN team and all teachers	2.06	1.13	2
Ensuring that the school SEN plan, policies and procedures are agreed and implemented	2.07	1.14	2
Leading and managing the SEN team and school supports, e.g. SNAs and Home School Liaison Teachers	2.19	1.22	2
Allocating resources and timetabling for pupils with SEN	2.21	1.30	2
Organising early intervention and prevention	2.22	1.28	2
Facilitating meetings between parents and various support services	2.23	1.21	2
Identifying and keeping records of pupils who need support at Level 2 or 3 of the Continuum of Support	2.24	1.30	2
Monitoring, recording and reviewing pupils' outcomes at group, class and whole-school level	2.38	1.30	2
Ensuring effective engagement with pre-school and post-primary schools to support the transition of pupils with SEN	2.46	1.28	2
Facilitating the CPD of all teachers in relation to the education of pupils with SEN	2.56	1.26	2

The inferential statistical analysis related to the data in Table 5.8 also involved an analysis of responses related to these ratings for SENCOs who held a post of responsibility at ML and SL level. Essentially this analysis sought to assess if post of responsibility level was associated with the SENCOs' rating regarding how closely they work with the SLT on these various roles and responsibilities. There were a number of significant associations, which are detailed in Table 5.9 that illustrate that a higher percentage of SL SENCOs gave 'very closely' ratings. This may indicate that SENCOs with a higher post of responsibility status work more closely with the SLT on various roles but there is a limitation with this result, which may have skewed the results, as these SL SENCOs were part of the SLT.

Table 5.9: Inferential statistical analysis results for the association between SENCO post of responsibility level (SL or ML) and their ratings on how closely they work with the SLT on various roles and responsibilities.

Roles and Responsibilities	Results	
	Chi-Square	‘very closely’ % rating
Consulting and liaising with relevant external bodies and agencies, such as NEPS	No significant association	
Overseeing a whole-school approach to assessment and screening to identify needs and to guide the allocation of appropriate supports	$\chi^2_4 = 16.728$, $p=0.002$	SL: 54.5% v ML: 31.9%
Ensuring that systems are in place for effective sharing of relevant information on students’ needs with the SEN team and all teachers	$\chi^2_4 = 11.783$, $p=0.019$	SL: 46.8% v ML: 29.3%
Ensuring that the school SEN plan, policies and procedures are agreed and implemented	$\chi^2_2 = 7.534$, $p=0.023$	SL: 79.9% v ML: 65.6%*
Leading and managing the SEN team and school supports, e.g. SNAs and Home School Liaison Teachers	No significant association	
Allocating resources and timetabling for pupils with SEN	$\chi^2_4 = 17.938$, $p=0.001$	SL: 52.6% v ML: 27.6%
Organising early intervention and prevention	$\chi^2_4 = 18501$, $p<0.001$	SL: 50.6% v ML: 27.6%
Facilitating meetings between parents and various support services	$\chi^2_4 = 15.803$, $p=0.003$	SL: 40.3% v ML: 21.6%
Identifying and keeping records of pupils who need support at Level 2 or 3 of the Continuum of Support	$\chi^2_4 = 15.795$, $p=0.003$	SL: 50.6% v ML: 25.9%
Monitoring, recording and reviewing pupils’ outcomes at group, class and whole-school level	$\chi^2_4 = 17.437$, $p=0.002$	SL: 42.9% v ML: 19.8%
Ensuring effective engagement with pre-school and post-primary schools to support the transition of pupils with SEN	$\chi^2_4 = 24.179$, $p<0.001$	SL: 40.3% v ML: 13.8%
Facilitating the CPD of all teachers in relation to the education of pupils with SEN	No significant association	

*Due to violation role categories were combined for this responsibility and the percentages represent the rating ‘very closely and closely’. SL: Senior Leadership (Principal and Deputy Principal), ML: Middle Leadership (AP1 and AP2).

Finally, in this section the SENCOs were asked to rate how the SEN team works with the SLT on a number of items. In Table 5.10, the mean and median responses for the ratings on the various tasks are provided. For this the lower the mean response the closer the rating is to ‘strongly agree’ as 1=‘strongly agree’ and 5=‘strongly disagree’. The item with the lowest mean response and thus the item closest to the rating ‘strongly agree’ was ‘The SEN Team has a positive working relationship with Senior Leadership’ (mean response = 1.71; percentage for ‘strongly agree’ rating = 48.0%). This was followed by ‘Senior Leadership respects and listens to my ideas for change’ (mean response = 1.74; percentage for ‘strongly agree’ rating = 48.6%) and then by ‘Senior Leadership and the SENCO/ SEN Team have useful skills which we can combine’ (mean response = 1.81; percentage for ‘strongly agree’ rating = 40.7%). Of note was the finding for the statement ‘The SENCO/ SEN Team have sufficient time to work with Senior Leadership’. Here the mean response was 3.4, and the percentage rating for ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ combined was 56.4%. Therefore, over half of the SENCOs are reporting that they do not feel that the SENCO/ SEN Team have sufficient time to work with the SLT in their school. Inferential statistical analysis was also conducted on this data and the analysis revealed that there was a significant association between post of responsibility status and how the SENCOs rated their agreement on the following two statements:

- ‘I feel my role as SENCO has status and is respected in the school’. The association between post of responsibility status and the SENCOs’ rating of agreement on this statement was significant ($\chi^2_2 = 13.87$, $p < 0.001$). For SENCOs who held a post of responsibility, 77.4% indicated that they ‘strongly agree or agree’ with this statement. For SENCOs without such a post, this percentage was less at 58.4%.
- ‘Senior Leadership respects and listens to my ideas for change’. The association between post of responsibility status and the SENCOs’ rating of agreement on this statement was significant ($\chi^2_2 = 19.67$, $p < 0.001$). For SENCOs who held a post of responsibility, 88.9% indicated that they ‘strongly agree or agree’ with this statement. For SENCOs without such a post of responsibility, this percentage was lower at 70.3%. Caution must be exercised with this result as the SENCOs with a post of responsibility included SENCOs (Principals and Deputy Principals) who were part of the senior leadership.

Table 5.10: SENCOs' rating on how the SEN Team work with the SLT team in their school. Mean (with standard deviation) and median responses (1='strongly agree', 5='strongly disagree') are provided.

Statements	Response		
	Mean	SD	Median
The SEN Team has a positive working relationship with Senior Leadership	1.71	0.84	2
Senior Leadership respects and listens to my ideas for change	1.74	0.91	2
Senior Leadership and the SENCO/ SEN Team have useful skills which we can combine	1.81	0.83	2
Senior Leadership is involved with and interested in SEN provision	1.84	1.03	2
Senior Leadership and the SEN Team have shared goals and priorities regarding SEN provision	1.89	0.97	2
I feel that my role as SENCO has status and is respected in the school	2.03	1.08	2
Relevant CPD helps the SENCO/ SEN Team to work effectively with Senior Leadership	2.19	1.05	2
My school has effective systems and procedures for linking with the Senior Leadership Team	2.37	1.15	2
The SENCO/ SEN Team have sufficient time to work with Senior Leadership	3.40	1.30	4

The inferential statistical analysis also revealed that there was a significant association between post of responsibility level (SL or ML) and the SENCOs ratings on the statements presented in Table 5.11. SENCOs with a post at SL level had higher 'strongly agree and agree' percentage ratings on a number of these statements as reported in Table 5.11. There is a caveat with these results as the SENCOs at SL level were part of the senior leadership and this may have impacted on how they rated these statements. Alternatively, it may be an indication of the gravity and importance that they attribute to this work.

Table 5.11: Inferential statistical analysis results for the association between SENCO post of responsibility level (SL or ML) and their ratings of agreement on various statements regarding how SENCOs work with the SLT.

Statements	Results	
	Chi-square results	'strongly agree & agree' % ratings
Senior Leadership and the SENCO/ SEN Team have useful skills which we can combine	$\chi^2_2 = 14.068$, $p < 0.001$	SL: 90.9% v ML: 74.1%
Senior Leadership is involved with and interested in SEN provision	$\chi^2_2 = 14.540$, $p < 0.001$	SL: 89.6% v ML: 71.6%
Relevant CPD helps the SENCO/ SEN Team to work effectively with Senior Leadership	$\chi^2_2 = 10.006$, $p = 0.007$	SL: 73.4% v ML: 57.8%
My school has effective systems and procedures for linking with the Senior Leadership Team	$\chi^2_2 = 9.170$, $p = 0.010$	SL: 69.5% v ML: 52.6%

In summary, the key findings related to this section's research question, namely *What are the role and responsibilities of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?* are as follows:

- The majority of SENCOs are part of the SLT in their schools and work 'very closely/ closely' with the SLT.
- Post of responsibility status is not significantly associated with how the SENCOs rated how they work with the SLT.
- Specifically, SENCOs work in general 'closely' with the SLT on numerous tasks related to leading and coordinating the strategic planning of school-wide inclusive practices, such as 'leading and managing SEN team and school supports'.
- SENCOs with a post of responsibility at senior leadership level had higher 'very closely and closely' ratings than middle leadership SENCOs regarding how closely the SLT work with the SEN team.
- The SENCOs overall agreed that they have a positive working relationship with the SLT and that the SLT 'respects and listens' to their ideas.

- SENCOs with a post of responsibility had a higher ‘strongly agree or agree’ percentage rating compared to SENCOs without a post on the statements ‘I feel my role as SENCO has status and is respected in the school’ and ‘Senior Leadership respects and listens to my ideas for change’. The association between post of responsibility status and the ratings on these statements was statistically significant.
- Over half of the SENCOs either ‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’ that they have sufficient time to work with the Senior Leadership. This aligns to the barrier, ‘lack of time’, which was identified by the SENCOs in this phase of the research.

5.5 SENCO Role Enablers: What are the perceived enablers to enactment of the SENCO role?

In this section, qualitative findings, via thematic analysis, are detailed which address the research question *What are the perceived enablers to enactment of the SENCO role?* This in turn provides further insight into how the SENCOs perceive their SENCO role. Initially, the SENCOs were asked to identify anything that enabled or facilitated them to execute their role effectively. One overall theme emerged in relation to the facilitators of the SENCO role enactment, namely ‘Knowledgeable, experienced and connected SENCOs are enabled by a culture of collaboration in a supportive environment’. It was evident from the data that the SENCOs indicated that experience together with professional learning enabled them to execute their role. They also indicated that communities of practice facilitated them in their role, which allowed them to connect with other professionals. In addition, support from colleagues and management together with a culture of collaboration in the schools enabled them to effectively enact their role and lead the provision of SEN. Four sub-themes were evident in the data, which were directly related to the identified theme. These sub-themes, which are detailed in Table 5.12, together with an explanation of each sub-theme. For this table and Tables 5.13-5.15, ‘P’ represents ‘Participant’ and the number provided with ‘P’ relates to the participant number, e.g. P251 = Participant 251.

Table 5.12: Theme, sub-theme and related explanation derived from the responses related to items that enabled or facilitated the SENCO role. P: Participant

Theme: Knowledgeable, experienced and connected SENCOs are enabled by a culture of collaboration in a supportive environment.	
Sub-Theme	Explanation
Collaboration	In the data there were 92 citations coded regarding this sub-theme. The SENCOs indicated that collaboration with class teachers, the SEN team and with the Principal and management facilitated effective role execution. The SENCOs referred to collaborative practice within three domains that enabled their role, namely class teacher collaboration, SEN team collaborative and Principal/ management collaboration. P163 commented that a facilitator was, <i>'A climate of collaboration that exists in the school which has been fostered and facilitated by the Principal'</i> .
Support	Supportive colleagues and supportive Principals and management were identified as facilitators to role execution. Supportive resourcing, such as administrative time and external agency support, were also identified across a number of SENCO responses. In total there were 199 citations coded in relation to this sub-theme with the majority pertaining to supportive colleagues, Principals and management (n=143). Specifically, P184 commented that the support from the Principal was a facilitator of the SENCO role and noted, <i>'excellent leadership, realising importance of role, relieving of some duties where possible to support & give time to fulfil role'</i> .
Teacher Professional Learning	The analysis revealed 134 citations related to this sub-theme. The SENCOs indicated that third-level qualifications, e.g. undergraduate and postgraduate, and on-going professional learning, e.g. Education Centre courses and webinars, facilitated effective role enactment. In addition, it was evident that participation in communities of practice, such as SENCO Forums, acted as SENCO role enablers. Specifically, there were 99 citations coded regarding the category 'professional learning' and 35 related to 'communities of practice'. Regarding this P24 commented <i>'being part of the SENCO Forum'</i> was an enabler and P138 stated <i>'I have a number of postgraduate qualifications in the field of SEN which I consider essential for any support teacher'</i> .
Experience	In total there were 53 citations related to this sub-theme. Experience across a number of areas facilitated effective SENCO role enactment. This included teaching experience in both SEN and mainstream settings. It was also evident that working with experienced colleagues in the area of SEN

	enabled the SENCOs to fulfil their role. Specifically, P124 recounted that <i>'having worked as a SET has guided and assisted me in my role'</i> .

In Table 5.13, the sub-themes, associated categories, representative quotes and the corresponding level from Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory as reflected in the data are presented for this theme. The levels provided from Bronfenbrenner's framework for each category are evident from the data. It is evident that the support and collaboration from staff and the Principals facilitates the SENCO in their role and that this is happening at the microsystem level. There is a certain degree of supportive resourcing from external agencies from the exosystem level. Teacher professional learning through communities of practice and third-level courses is occurring at the mesosystem level. In addition, the experience gained by teachers at the microsystem level enables them in their role, as does the practice of working with experienced colleagues at the microsystem and mesosystem level.

In summary, the key findings related to this section's research question, namely ***What are the perceived enablers to enactment of the SENCO role?*** are as follows:

- The enablers to SENCO role enactment, perceived by the SENCOs, were collaboration with colleagues and Principal/ management, support from colleagues and principals/ management, teacher professional learning and experience.

Table 5.13: Thematic analysis for responses related to items that enabled or facilitated the SENCO role. Theme, sub-themes, categories, representative quotes and the level of the Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological System Theory are outlined. P: Participants

Theme: Knowledgeable, experienced, and connected SENCOs are enabled by a culture of collaboration in a supportive environment.			
Sub-Theme	Categories	Representative Quotes	Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory: Level
Collaboration	Class Teacher Collaboration	'Collaborative planning time...positive mind-set from staff members.' (P202) 'Good teacher collaboration and flexibility with timetables.' (P242) 'Friday afternoon hour...to collaborate with class teachers and SETs..' (P353)	Microsystem
	SEN Team Collaboration	'Great SEN team...sharing of ideas/ resources by SET team at monthly meetings.' (P129) 'The trust of the team and their collaboration.' (P158) 'Special education team work well together on the same page, willing to try new things.' (P263)	Microsystem
	Principal/ Management Collaboration	'A climate of collaboration in the school which has been fostered and enabled by the principal.' (P163) 'Positive working relationship with school principal.' (P188) 'Good relationship and opportunity to consult/ collaborate with principal.' (P353) 'Collaboration with Senior Management for whole-school approach' (P360)	Microsystem
Support	Supportive Colleagues	'The support and understanding of colleagues.' (P22) 'Supportive, cooperative staff who communicate formally and informally in support of the pupils.' (P134) 'Supportive staff in teaching and SNA.' (P337)	Microsystem/ Mesosystem
	Supportive Principals/ Management	'Supportive principal accepts advice based on my expertise.' (P60) 'Value placed on the role by principal and senior leadership team.' (P64) '...support and trust of Board of Management to take a creative and innovative approach to the role.' (P110) 'Excellent leadership, realising importance of the role, relieving of some activities/ duties where possible to support and give time to fulfil role.' (P184) 'Support from principal re: autonomy in the role, continuous CPD provision.' (P227) 'Supportive principal with SEN experience & qualifications. This meant that needs of pupils and issues with their support, & matching their care needs with the appropriate SNA/SET we're fully understood.' (P298)	Microsystem
	Supportive Resourcing	'One administration day per week.' (P33) 'Good initial support from NCSE...' (P49) 'The DP (Deputy Principal) release days were invaluable. Struggling since they are gone.' (P107) 'NEPS support & advice. Funding for resources, e.g. soft play, sensory garden and room. Fidget toy.' (P200) 'Staffing, access to outside agencies and professional advice and support.' (P239) 'Time free from teaching during pinch points.' (P300)	Exosystem

Teacher Professional Learning	Third-level Qualifications	<i>'...I have a number of postgraduate qualifications in the field of SEN which I consider essential for any support teacher.'</i> (P138) <i>'Good foundation from SEN modules in MIC. Especially the SEN PARENTS modules, where we had parents as guests and spoke about what helped them.'</i> (P144) <i>'My own self confidence having completed the PGSEN.'</i> (P145) <i>'Post grad in SEN was a MASSIVE HELP.'</i> (P301)	Mesosystem
	On-going CPD	<i>'Constant CPD on my own time. Keeping up with current research ^ recommendations for best practice.'</i> (P48) <i>'Support and funding from board of management for CPD.'</i> (P57) <i>'Constant upskilling and support from education centres and PDST.'</i> (P92) <i>'I've done numerous in-service courses and attended ILSA conferences on special education.'</i> (P260)	Mesosystem/ Exosystem
	Community of Practice	<i>'Being part of SENCO Forum.'</i> (P24) <i>'Sharing with SEN CoP, former membership, founder, organiser & county secretary of ILSA membership of various online forums including Special Ed Teachers on Facebook, attendance at many AEN/SEN webinars & courses.'</i> (P97) <i>'Learning as you go. Support from Facebook groups and word of mouth or friends in similar positions.'</i> (P150) <i>'I am part of a SET support group on FB and without them I would be lost. Special Education Teachers Ireland.'</i> (P320)	Mesosystem
Experience	SEN Teaching Experience	<i>'I am the teaching principal of a 52 pupil school. We have 3 class teachers and I am the SET teacher. Therefore I am the SENCO. I am 13 years principal in this school so knowledge of the pupils, their families and the system are pivotal to the role...Experience and local knowledge is vital to the role.'</i> (P26) <i>'...om the ground experience.'</i> (P72) <i>'Experience of a variety of engagements in special ed. inside and outside the primary school system.'</i> (P229) <i>'Lots of experience in SEN before the role.'</i> (P113) <i>'Having worked as a SET has guided and assisted me in my role.'</i> (P124) <i>'Experience in much bigger settings/ UK systems.'</i> (P216)	Microsystem
	Teaching Experience	<i>'My understanding of the human condition which is based on my experience as a teacher in different school contexts, my experience as a principal and extensive reading.'</i> (P5) <i>'Having plenty of mainstream class teaching experience.'</i> (P203) <i>'Experience in much bigger settings/ UK systems.'</i> (P216)	Microsystem
	Working with Experienced Colleagues	<i>'My own and colleagues experience.'</i> (P3) <i>'Working with an experienced staff who have undertaken CPD in area of SEN.'</i> (P133) <i>'Experience and networking with colleagues.'</i> (P316) <i>'Learning from previous SENCOs in the school who were open and willing to share knowledge.'</i> (P360)	Microsystem/ Mesosystem

5.6 SENCO Role Barriers: What are the perceived barriers to enactment of the SENCO role?

In this section, qualitative findings, via thematic analysis, are detailed which address the research question *What are the perceived barriers to enactment of the SENCO role?* In an open question on the survey, the SENCOs were asked to identify anything that acted as a barrier to the effective execution of their role. The RTA resulted in the emergence of one theme, namely ‘The SENCO role is extensive and nebulous and operates with insufficient time, inadequate external professional support and within a policy vacuum’. It is evident from the data that the SENCO role is extensive and that the SENCOs hold multiple roles, such as teaching combined with their SENCO duties, and multiple posts and responsibilities, such as Deputy Principal and SENCO. Aligned to this is the fact that the SENCOs have insufficient time to execute their roles. Other significant barriers that emerged from the data were inadequate external professional support and ambiguous and limited policy support in terms of role recognition and description, staffing, resources and professional learning related to new practices and the SENCO role. Four sub-themes were evident in the data, which are related to the identified theme. These sub-themes are detailed in Table 5.14.

Table 5.14: Theme, sub-themes with explanations related to items that acted as a barrier to the effective execution of the SENCO role. P: Participant

Theme: The SENCO role is extensive and nebulous and operates with insufficient time, inadequate external professional support and within a policy vacuum.	
Sub-theme	Explanation
Lack of Time	It was clear from the data that time constraints were a dominant theme across the SENCOs’ responses. In total there were 206 citations coded. The SENCOs indicated that a lack of planning and collaboration time, and a lack of time for SENCO administration were barriers to effective role enactment. Regarding this sub-theme, P39 insisted that a barrier was <i>‘lack of planning and coordination time during the day when trying to teach a full timetable as a SET. Time is needed to fill in paperwork, meet parents, liaise with outside agencies/professionals, meet and collaborate with teachers and also provide support for staff members who are new to SEN’</i> (P39).

Multiple Roles and Responsibilities	Having multiple roles, responsibilities and extensive workload was identified as a barrier to effective role enactment (number of citations coded = 120). This included having both a full teaching timetable along with the SENCO role. It also included having multiple posts and responsibilities, such as being a SET, Principal and a SENCO, and having an extensive workload. Specifically P170 commented <i>'The main barrier is that I am a SET, Deputy Principal and SENCO. In a new school, with 11 years of SEN experience but in an altogether different setting. The area of SEN is so huge and there is so much to know and learn that it can seem overwhelming'</i> .
Inadequate External Supports	The SENCOs indicated that support from external professional services and agencies, such as the HSE, NEPS, NCSE, were lacking and inadequate (number of citations coded = 76). Some SENCOs indicated that they were without direct access to relevant staff from these agencies, e.g. NEPS psychologist. The process and procedures to get support were time-consuming, frustrating and cumbersome which further impacted on the SENCOs' workload. The long waiting lists associated with getting assessments and support from these external agencies was also identified as a barrier. As an example, P202 conveyed <i>'Filling out lengthy assessment documents to assist parents to get on a pathway to the supportive services for their children in need is another barrier. The length of time it takes for a child to be assessed and receive services from the relevant trained professionals, such as SLT and OT...Better links with outside agencies to reduce these times and allow early intervention would be hugely beneficial to reducing SET caseloads and have shorter intervention time in school'</i> .
Ambiguous and Limited Policy Guidance	Ambiguous and limited policy guidance was identified as a barrier to effective SENCO role execution (citations coded = 125). Specifically, the SENCOs indicated that there was a lack of resources and staffing from the Department of Education, e.g. teachers and SNAs, and a lack of training for the SENCO role. In addition, the SENCOs asserted that there was a lack of SENCO role clarity and recognition from the Department of Education and that this was negatively impacting on the role. Regarding this, P245 noted that a barrier was <i>'an outdated policy, not having an official title, being told to lead SEN but with no post of responsibility added or guidance given'</i> .

In Table 5.15, the sub-themes, associated categories, representative quotes and the corresponding level from Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory as reflected in the data are presented for this theme. The levels provided from Bronfenbrenner's framework for each category are as evident from the data. SENCOs identified that a lack of time is a barrier to role enactment and this barrier is occurring due to a lack of

designated and protected time for SENCO duties from the exosystem level. The ambiguous and limited policy guidance on the SENCO role and the lack of formal role recognition from the exosystem level results in SENCOs undertaking multiple roles and responsibilities. The level from Bronfenbrenner's framework related to the sub-theme 'Inadequate External Supports' is the exosystem. Theoretically, the engagement with these services should be at the mesosystem level but the inadequate support from these services means that the mesosystem is sparsely populated. Policy decisions from the exosystem have a cascading effect across the bioecological system and impact directly on the challenges experienced by SENCOs in their school microsystem.

In summary, the key findings related to this section's research question, namely ***What are the perceived barriers to enactment of the SENCO role?*** are as follows:

- The barriers to SENCO role enactment, perceived by the SENCOs, were lack of time, having multiple roles, inadequate external agency supports and inadequate departmental support.

Table 5.15: Thematic analysis for responses related to items acted as barriers to the effective execution of the SENCO role. Theme, sub-themes, representative quotes and the level of the Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological System Theory are outlined. P: Participant

Theme: The SENCO role is extensive and nebulous and operates with insufficient time, inadequate external professional support and within a policy vacuum.			
Sub-theme	Categories	Representative Quotes	Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory: Level
Lack of Time	Lack of Planning and Collaboration Time	<i>'Lack of planning and coordination time during the day when trying to teach a full timetable as an SET. Time is needed to fill in paperwork, meet parents, liaise with outside agencies/professionals, meet and collaborate with teachers and also provide support for staff members who are new to SEN.'</i> (P39) <i>'Lack of time to facilitate coordination and discussion on pupils receiving or being considered for support.'</i> (P149) <i>'Lack of time to collaborate with all involved.'</i> (P179) <i>'The time constraint in trying to meet with colleagues to adequately discuss and plan for SEN pupils.'</i> (P218) <i>'...time constraints- full timetable with little time to collaborate with others.'</i> (P305) <i>'Lack of time - difficult to liaise with staff, parents and outside agencies before and after school - frequently leaving messages, missing return calls.'</i> (P351)	Mesosystem/ Exosystem
	Lack of SENCO Role Administration Time	<i>'Lack of time as I am teaching deputy principal, volume of paperwork.'</i> (P28) <i>'Not enough hours in the day for the admin side of Special Education.'</i> (P29) <i>'Time foremost no time allocated for SENCO role...consuming paperwork requirements which often don't result in gaining much needed resources.'</i> (P60) <i>'Time! I still have a full teaching timetable so sessions often get dropped to 'take that phone call' or 'make that phone call' or attend meetings etc.'</i> (P71) <i>'Lack of administrative time for the role. This is only part of my post and to do it effectively in a school of our size a dedicated full-time administrative SENCO role is necessary.'</i> (P89) <i>'No official time allowed on your timetable to carry out responsibilities effectively i.e. need some administrative time once a week to catch up on paperwork.'</i> (P122) <i>'Lack of time, the administration days for deputy principals as part of the Covid response plans were invaluable.'</i> (P140) <i>'TIME or lack of it. Expected to organise all SEN administration and also teach a case load.'</i> (P155) <i>'Time is the biggest barrier. Frequently take work home each evening and weekends and work late hours.'</i> (P202) <i>'Not enough hours in the day. Burnout.'</i> (P354)	Exosystem

		<i>'Time constraints. Unlike in secondary schools, there is no time allowed during the week for SENCO admin duties. Being SENCO in a large school, on top of having a full caseload, is extremely time consuming.'</i> (P362)	
Multiple Roles and Responsibilities	SENCO Extensive Workload	<i>'Workload - teaching with only minimal coordination time.'</i> (P120) <i>'Workload and time management...'</i> (P152) <i>'Time- demands of the SENCO role plus full timetable makes the role a very stressful one. Post of Responsibility including other duties adds to the immense workload.'</i> (P159) <i>'Time is a huge barrier. Your day is teaching the children and after that you plan. Then you have to upskill, read psychological reports, research test methods, learn how to implement new tests, address emotional needs of the students and the teachers it is endless. I work at least a 60 hour week and I am paid for 30.'</i> (P165) <i>'The onerous paper work.'</i> (P263) <i>'Too much paperwork taking away from the job. I find myself always behind on paperwork despite bringing work home and staying after school every day.'</i> (P320) <i>'Work load is extremely heavy, paper work is very challenging to keep on top us in comparison to when I was a class teacher.'</i> (P370)	Mesosystem/ Exosystem
	Teaching Caseload along with the SENCO Role	<i>'Having to combine the role with a full timetable as a class or SET teacher.'</i> (P191) <i>'...I do not feel it's feasible to do the role well and have a full timetable of SET hours. I spend countless hours at home catching up on SENCO responsibilities. I feel like I get pulled from my SET role a great deal.'</i> (P227) <i>'...no time allocation to carry out SENCO duties during the school day - as teaching a full timetable...'</i> (P234) <i>'Having to work full time as SET teacher as well as carry out SENCO role. No time allowance on timetables for specific SENCO role.'</i> (P235) <i>'Having to combine the role with a full teaching caseload.'</i> (P240) <i>'No free time to allow for coordinating, assessment, meeting parents, etc. Very difficult to manage SENCO duties and teach full time.'</i> (P350)	Mesosystem/ Exosystem
	Multiple Posts and Responsibilities (e.g. Principal/ DP and SENCO)	<i>'I am a teaching principal & being SENCO is just 1 of the many duties & responsibilities that is part of my role.'</i> (P105) <i>'Time pressure and demands on SENCO and Deputy Principals etc.'</i> (P113) <i>'I've never worked in SET nor have any other members of the SEN team this year. I am acting deputy principal and only have the role of SENCO due to acting up. I did have some hand over with previous members but it is the day-to-day working and decisions which have made the transition to SET difficult. I also find the responsibility that comes with the role hard to execute.'</i> (P114) <i>'...having other responsibilities along with SET to cater for as part of DP role.'</i> (P122)	Mesosystem/ Exosystem

		<i>'Main barrier is that I'm an SET, Deputy Principal and SENCO. In a new school, with 11 years of SEN experience but in an altogether different setting. The area of SEN or AEN is so huge and there is so much to know and learn that it can seem overwhelming.'</i> (P170) <i>'Demands of combining SET teaching and duties of SENCO...'</i> (P196) <i>'My own SEN caseload plus other AP1 duty... overseeing whole-school Maths.'</i> (P205) <i>'I am the principal, I am the SENCO, I am the only SET in my school ... I don't have a team to help in SET ... It's just me!!! So it is very difficult.'</i> (P231) <i>'My Deputy Principal duties, my teaching commitments (I have a full timetable the same as the rest of the SET team) Deputising in the absence of the principal.'</i> (P237) <i>'Too many responsibilities in AP1 post, Working as SET while also working as SENCO.'</i> (P324)	
Inadequate External Supports	Inadequate Support from External Professional Services	<i>'Not enough supports for children and having to go through exceptional reviews with the NCSE to get more support is not fit for purpose.'</i> (P13) <i>'We have a very poor HSE support service in our area. Waiting list for OT is 4 years. developmental check-ups are not picking up children with ASD, SLT and social and emotional needs. We have some very stressed parents.'</i> (P16) <i>'Not having a NEPS psychologist appointed to cater for our school since Sept, 2022.'</i> (P31) <i>'Outside professionals providing recommendations that are not in line with the department criteria e.g. recommending assistive technology for pupils who do not qualify.'</i> (P57) <i>'...it is increasingly difficult to manage the SEN needs in schools due to the lack of supports from outside agencies such as NEPS & HSE'</i> (P105) <i>'Difficulties accessing information from outside agencies. Many of our parents don't speak English as their first language and need and/or request help with understanding what is happening with services.'</i> (P163) <i>'...lack of support from external agencies, lack of and inconsistent support from SENO/NEPS - 3 NEPS psychologists giving different advice.'</i> (P172) <i>'...lack of support from outside agencies-speech and language, OT, Ed Psych, clinical psych. ...'</i> (P176) <i>'Meeting a brick wall when dealing with external agencies and the absolute absence of any real support and help for our SEN children. The constant battle with SENO, endless application processes. It seems they are working against us not with us in determining the best interest of the child.'</i> (P189) <i>'Filling out lengthy assessment documents to assist parents get on a pathway to supportive services for their children in need is another barrier. The length of time it takes for a child to be assessed and receive services from the relevant trained professionals that the need such as SLT and OT to help SEN pupils with participation and learning outcomes in mainstream school...Better links with outside agencies to reduce these times and allow early intervention would be hugely beneficial to reducing SET caseloads and have shorter intervention time in school.'</i> (P202)	Exosystem

		<i>'A very frustrating path to getting children assessed so that they can get a diagnosis and receive their needed and deserved interventions. The poor availability of occupational services and speech and language services for children. It is very unhelpful that SENOs make the decision regarding our SNA allocation leaving us in situations where children are left in dangerous ,untenable situations. '</i> (P218) <i>'Parts of the NCSE are not fit for purpose. The NCSE are the biggest barrier to special education support in my school when they refuse vital supports such as Assistive technology...and SNA access...SNA exceptional review process is designed for failure and to put schools off applying. '</i> (P264)	
	Inappropriate Waiting Lists	<i>'Unable to access external supports for children due to poor response from HSE. ...length of time children are waiting for assessment... '</i> (P77) <i>'...lack of support from outside agencies due to long waiting lists. '</i> (P263) <i>'...Wait times for public assessments are a disgrace. Wait times for CAMHS are a disgrace... '</i> (P264) <i>'...lack of public services and/or long waiting lists for OT/SLT/Psychology/HSE dieticians/HSE sleep support/ really slows provision of support. '</i> (P277) <i>'Waiting times for assessments from external agencies... '</i> (P347)	Exosystem
Ambiguous and Limited Policy Guidance	Lack of Role Clarity and Recognition	<i>'...lack of clarity of role of SENCO... '</i> (P57) <i>'No post of responsibility given or extra time allocation... '</i> (P116) <i>'Other teachers being unaware of my role and a lack of a set job description... '</i> (P157) <i>'Lack of clear guidelines as to what the role entails; '</i> (P175) <i>'Department of Education's lack of understanding of the role and the time that needs to be invested to do it well. No proper job description matched with time each element of the role might take. Lack of suitable, relevant training. '</i> (P229) <i>'An outdated policy, not having an official title, being told to lead SEN but with no post of responsibility added or guidance given. '</i> (P245)	Exosystem
	Lack of Training	<i>'Lack of specific training for the role... '</i> (P150) <i>'...insufficient training available to guide leading a SET team. '</i> (P234) <i>'...I've also never found a SENCO CPD course to upskill in the area. '</i> (P237) <i>'I would like to do some in service to become better equipped to execute my role, I am solely relying on experience and knowledge that I have gained over the years. '</i> (P260) <i>'No training or ongoing support from DES. Unclear circulars and changes being made with no training/education. '</i> (P270) <i>'...lack of CPD for teachers re new model. '</i> (P360)	Exosystem
	Lack of Resources and Staffing	<i>'...lack of available resources from the Department. '</i> (P28) <i>'...lack of support from DES (need more SET and SNA's) lack of funding... '</i> (P96) <i>'Lack of resources, DES cutting SET hours, funding... '</i> (P101)	Exosystem

		<i>'Lack of funds to buy resources that I know would be of huge benefit to the SET team and the children we work with.'</i> (P135) <i>'...limited amount of resources, e.g. lack of SNA access, difficulties filling SEN teaching roles...'</i> (P152) <i>'Department of Education lack of provision of SET teachers and SNAs.'</i> (P170) <i>'A cut in SET staffing allocation.'</i> (P246) <i>'The amount of resources allocated by the Department, I am the only SET in a school with a huge number of additional needs.'</i> (P249) <i>'Lack of other SET teachers in school means all my time is spent as SET and very little time for coordination and planning.'</i> (P254) <i>'Lack of funding to purchase resources. Poor ICT infrastructure in the school. Poor accommodation for SET. Portacabin with one smallish room more than 25 years old.'</i> (P272) <i>'Constant challenge due to lack of resources (teachers & SNAs) and lack of substitute teachers.'</i> (P332) <i>'When you do not have your full allocation of the support team. When a lot of the SEN team are being used as classroom teachers or are unavailable. When there is a lot of inexperience on the SEN team a large amount of time can be taken up with mentoring and supporting individual teachers.'</i> (P344)	

5.7 Professional learning needs of the SENCO: What are the professional learning needs of SENCOs and supports needed to allow them to effectively enact their role?

In this section, the findings related to the final research question, namely *What are the professional learning needs of SENCOs and supports needed to allow them to effectively enact their role?*, are detailed. Specifically, the professional learning background, experiences and needs of the SENCOs are detailed.

5.7.1 SETAM and professional learning

Initially the SENCOs were asked if they were a SENCO prior to the introduction of the SETAM in 2017 and if so if they had received any in-service/ professional learning related to the implementation of the SETAM. Specifically, 61.2% of the SENCOs indicated that they were not a SENCO prior to the introduction of the model. The respondents who were a SENCO prior to the SETAM in 2017 (n=144; 39.8%) were asked to what extent their role was altered due to SETAM and these findings are outlined in Figure 5.12. Overall 41.7% felt that their role significantly changed.

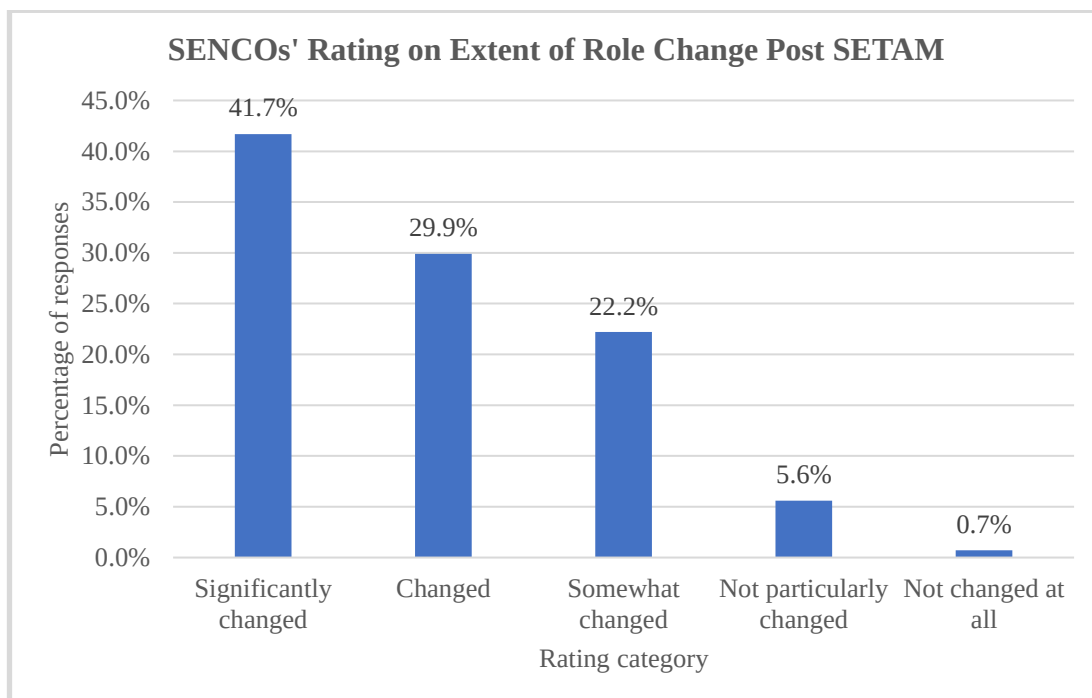


Figure 5.12: SENCOs' (n=144) ratings in relation to the extent that their role has changed due to the introduction of the SETAM in 2017. Percentage of responses.

In relation to professional learning regarding the implementation of the SETAM, 56.3% of the SENCOs indicated that they received professional learning, while the remaining 43.7% indicated that they had no professional learning specific to the SETAM implementation. In Table 5.16, the findings related to the types of professional learning regarding the SETAM implementation received by the 209 SENCOs (56.3%) are detailed.

Table 5.16: Types of professional learning engaged with by the 209 SENCOs who were in receipt of such professional learning in relation to the SETAM. Percentage of responses.

Type of Professional Learning	Percentage of responses
Approved day release course on the new model (in school hours)	15.6%
NCSE school-based support on the new model	14.6%
Local Education Centre course on the new model (out of school hours)	15.9%
Online/ e-learning courses on the new model	18.6%
Network meetings with other teachers on the new model	6.3%
Attending conferences on the new model	8.6%
Meetings with NEPS in relation to the new model	17.7%
Other*	2.7%

*Other: postgrad in special education, SEN conference organised by INTO, summer course, online discussion forum, designed and delivered courses on the new model.

5.7.2 Professional learning needs of SENCOs

In this section, findings are detailed in relation to the professional learning needs of SENCOs. Specifically, these questions and findings are framed around a postgraduate level programme for SENCOs and the preferred delivery type for any professional learning for the SENCO role. Initially the SENCOs were asked to rate the importance (1='very important', 5='not important at all') of various components for a postgraduate level programme of professional learning for SENCOs and the results are detailed in Table 5.17. In this table the mean and median responses are provided. The component with the lowest mean response and thus closest to 'very important' is 'Teaching strategies for students with SEN' (1.26), followed by 'Developing alternative curriculum for students with SEN' (1.29). All components had a mean

response rating less than 2, which highlights that all SENCOs thought they were ‘important’. This again may be reflective of the extensive role of the SENCO and their associated learning needs. Inferential statistical analysis was undertaken on this data set to ascertain if post of responsibility status was associated with the SENCOs’ ratings on this question. The findings indicated that the association between SENCO post of responsibility status and their agreement rating for the component ‘Leadership and management in education’ was significant ($X^2_2 = 17.08$, $p < 0.001$). Regarding this, 88.9% of SENCOs with a post of responsibility rated this component as ‘very important or important’, while this figure for SENCOs without such a post was 72.3%.

Table 5.17: SENCOs rating of the importance of various components for a postgraduate level programme of professional learning for SENCOs. Mean (with standard deviations) and median responses (1=‘very important’, 5=‘not important at all’) are provided.

Programme Components	Response		
	Mean	SD	Median
Teaching strategies for students with SEN	1.26	0.49	1
Developing alternative curriculum for students with SEN, e.g. evidence-based strategies	1.29	0.53	1
Identifying pupils whose needs require support at Level 2 or 3 on the Continuum of Support	1.31	0.53	1
Co-ordinating SEN teams and school supports, e.g. SNAs	1.36	0.60	1
Inclusion of pupils with SEN into mainstream classes	1.36	0.61	1
Monitoring of pupil progress	1.36	0.54	1
Learning difficulties: Types, characteristics and assessment	1.36	0.60	1
Effective allocation and timetabling of SEN provision	1.37	0.61	1
Developing skills in collaborating with others, e.g. teachers & the SLT	1.38	0.59	1
Working with parents of children with SEN	1.39	0.58	1
Psychological assessments: Types, characteristics and assessment	1.41	0.63	1
School policy and planning in SEN	1.42	0.61	1
Working with external agencies/ support services for SEN, e.g. OT	1.42	0.60	1
Inclusive policies	1.47	0.65	1
Mentoring and coaching of SEN staff	1.48	0.66	1

Co-teaching: Types and effective implementation	1.51	0.71	1
Standardised tests, diagnostic tests and cognitive assessments (Paper-based and online)	1.54	0.70	1
Administration, record keeping, and digital literacy skills	1.58	0.72	1
Contemporary issues in inclusive and special education	1.61	0.73	1
Supporting pupils' transitions to and from primary school	1.63	0.72	1
Leadership and management in education	1.64	0.83	1
The Law and Special Education Needs	1.68	0.80	1
Information, communication and assistive technology	1.72	0.75	2
Establishing and co-ordinating special classes	1.80	0.96	2
Identifying relevant CPD and providing CPD to staff	1.83	0.79	2
Theoretical concepts relating to inclusive and special education	1.86	0.82	2

Next, the SENCOs were asked to choose their top five preferences for the type of teacher professional learning needed for the SENCO role. The results are provided in Figure 5.13 and it is evident that the preferred type of teacher professional learning is 'relevant day release courses' (67.9%), followed by 'communities of practice' (65.2%) and then by 'NCSE school-based support' (62.3%).

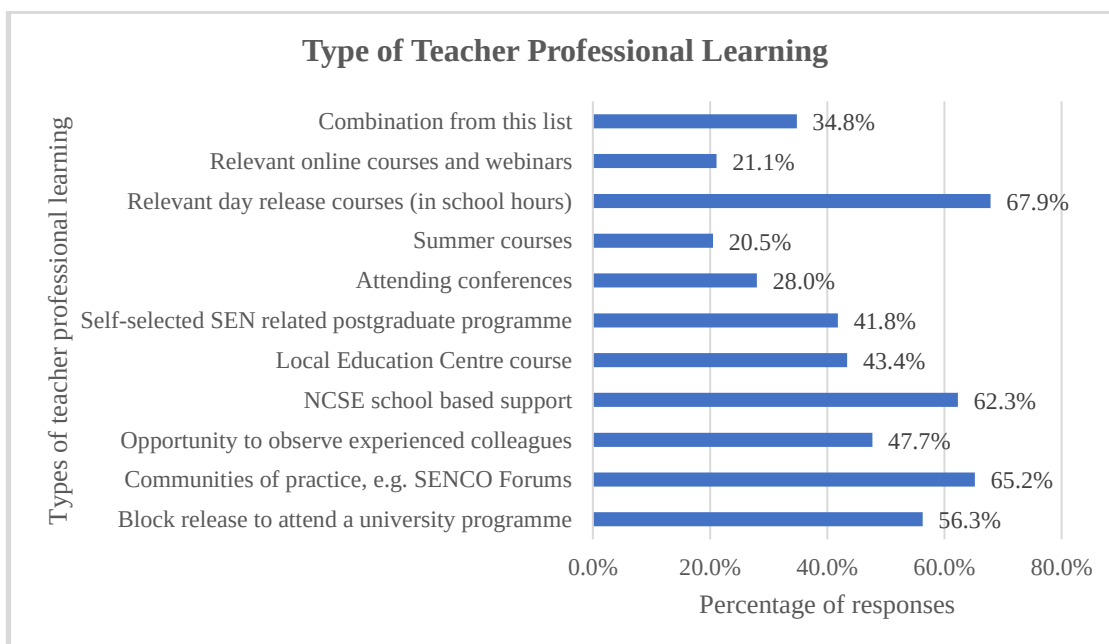


Figure 5.13: Type of teacher professional level for the SENCO role. Percentage of responses for each type.

The SENCOs' who selected 'combination from this list' provided the following examples of combination options; 'observing colleagues, NCSE school

visits, day courses', 'shadowing peers, college course, day courses', 'block release, SENCO forums and SEN related postgraduate study', 'college and professional community of practice', 'postgraduate qualifications and CPD', and 'community of practice established within postgraduate course'.

Finally, the SENCOs were asked if there was a need for a SENCO specific third-level postgraduate programme and the findings are detailed in Figure 5.14. The majority felt that such a programme is needed for the SENCO role.

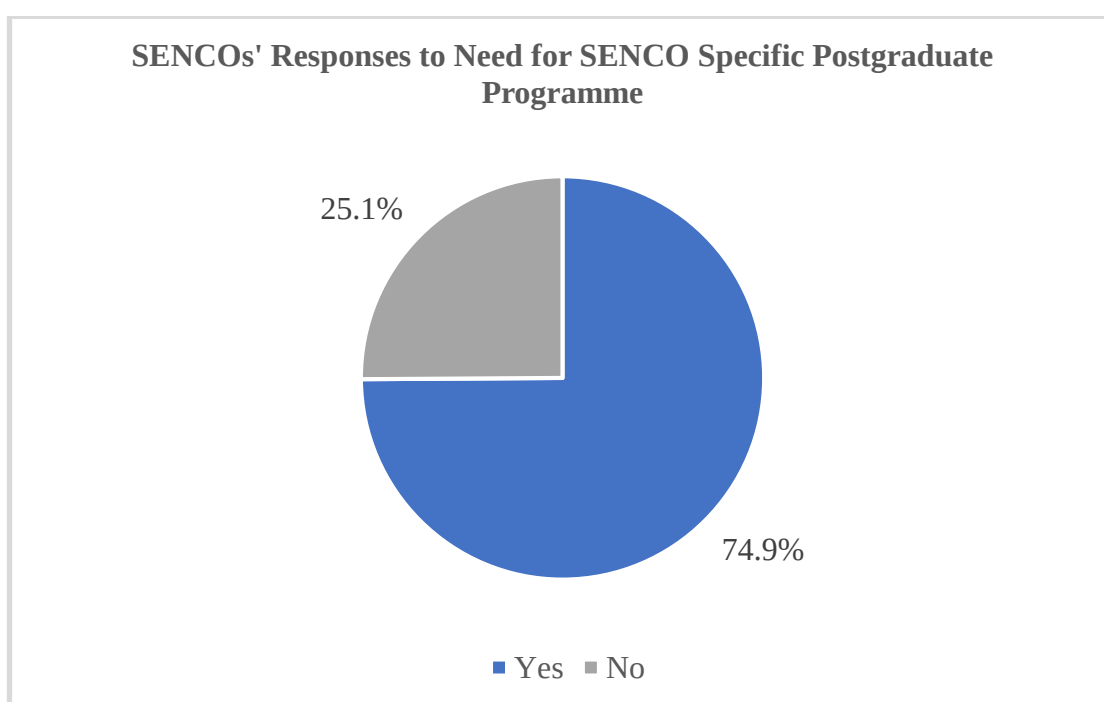


Figure 5.14: SENCOs' responses to the need for a SENCO specific third-level postgraduate programme.

In summary the key findings related to this section's research question, namely *What are the professional learning needs of SENCOs and supports needed to allow them to effectively enact their role?* are as follows:

- The SENCOs rated all 26 listed components of a professional learning programme for SENCOs, which included components related to the leadership and coordination of SEN provision, as 'very important/ important'. This could again be indicative of the vast remit of the SENCO role and the associated areas of expertise related to the role.

- ‘Teaching strategies for students with SEN’ was rated as the ‘most important’ component of a professional learning programme. Again it is noteworthy that all components were rated as important.
- SENCOs with a post of responsibility had a higher ‘very important or important’ percentage rating for the component ‘Leadership and management in education’ compared to those with a post. The association between post of responsibility status and the SENCOs’ rating on this component was statistically significant.
- The preferred type of professional learning indicated by the SENCOs was relevant day release courses followed by communities of practice, NCSE school-based support and then block release to attend a university programme.
- The majority of SENCOs indicated that they feel there is a need for a SENCO specific third-level postgraduate programme.

5.8 Phase One Findings Influencing Phase Two

As a result of the sequential design of this study, findings from Phase One influenced, guided and informed the development of the interview schedule for the subsequent data collection phase (Phase Two). The SENCO and Principal interview schedules for Phase Two aimed to elicit more in-depth data related to the findings from Phase One. The questions were framed around the key areas identified from Phase One, which are outlined in Figure 5.15.

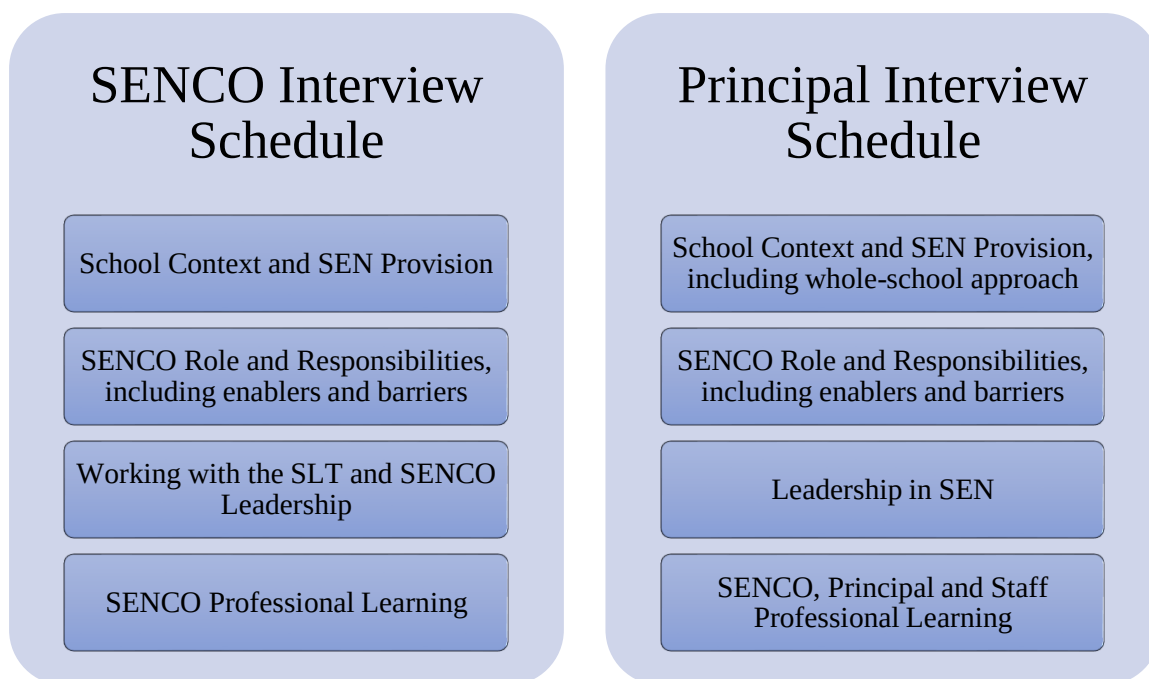


Figure 5.15: Key areas of focus for the Phase Two interviews arising out of Phase One findings.

Specifically certain questions drew on the results from Phase One and asked the participants to provide some context, examples or reasoning for findings derived from this phase. In Table 5.18 and 5.19 the specific questions and detail that aimed to delve deeper into the Phase One findings from the SENCO and the principal interview schedules respectively are outlined.

Table 5.18: SENCO interview schedule with detail on examples of questions that sought to elicit more in-depth data in relation to the Phase One findings.

Question Number	Detail
Q11	This question drew on the data from Phase One related to the top three most important SENCO roles and responsibilities and asked the participants to explain why these responsibilities were of importance. <i>Q11: In Phase One (the survey), SENCOs rated the importance of various SENCO role and responsibilities. The Top 3 were leading and implementing whole-school initiatives, identifying pupils with additional needs and coordinating the SEN team. In your opinion what are the most important roles and responsibilities and why?</i>
Q16	This question referred to the result from Phase One that 71% of SENCOs said that their role changed due to SETAM. Subsequently, the participants were asked if their role changed and if so how policy changes impacted on their role.

	<i>Q16: The survey indicated that 71% of SENCOs said that their role changed due to the new model. Has your particular role changed in any way due to policy changes? Explain.</i>
Q17	Here reference was made to the key enablers of the SENCO role that were identified from Phase One, such as ‘support and collaboration of colleagues’ and the participants were asked if they experienced this and to provide reasons and examples related to the enablers. <i>Q17: In Phase One (the survey) the area of ‘support and collaboration of colleagues’ and professional learning came through as factors that effectively enabled the SENCO role. In your opinion, have you experienced this and if so can you give me an example of how these factors or other factors enable your role. Are there any other factors that facilitate your role?</i>
Q19	This question drew on the Phase One findings regarding the key barriers to the SENCO role identified from Phase One, such as lack of time, and sought to examine if the participants experienced this and if so how these barriers impacted their role. <i>Q19: The survey identified that the main barriers to effective execution of the role were time constraints, having multiple roles and inadequate support from external professional services. Have you encountered any of these barriers or others? Can you tell me how they have impacted your role?</i>
Q28	In this question reference was made to the findings from Phase One regarding training (professional learning) in relation to SETAM and aimed to assess if the participants received such training and whether this was effective and impacted on their practices. <i>Q28: The survey indicated that 44% of SENCOs said they had no training regarding the implementation of the new model. Did you receive training and was it effective in the implementation of the model or in deciding how to allocate resources?</i>
Q29	Here the findings from Phase One related to the percentage of SENCOs who were part of a community of practice was referred to and participants were asked if they are part of such a community and if so how has it benefitted them and why. <i>Q29: The survey found that 39% of SENCOs are part of a community of practice. Are you a member of a community of practice or have you attended any gatherings of either SENCOs or SETs? If so have you found it beneficial and why?</i>
Q31	In this question the findings from Phase One related to the percentage of SENCOs who felt there was a need for a SENCO specific third-level postgraduate programme was detailed. The participants were asked if such a programme was needed and if so why. <i>Q31: The survey showed that 75% of SENCOs think there is a need for a SENCO specific third level postgraduate programme. Do you think there is a need for this and why?</i>
Q32	Here the findings from Phase One related to the most sought after components for a SENCO specific postgraduate programme were outlined. The participants were asked

	for their insights into the components of such a programme and were asked to provide reasons for these insights. <i>Q32: The survey showed that the most sought after components for a SENCO specific postgraduate programme were teaching strategies for SEN, developing alternative curriculum including evidence-based strategies, and identifying pupils' level of need. Do you agree with this or should other aspects be included? Why? Explain.</i>

Table 5.19: Principal interview schedule with detail on examples of questions that sought to elicit more in-depth data in relation to the Phase One findings.

Question Number	Detail
Q15	This question was related to the SENCO roles and responsibilities results from Phase One and aimed to gain the principals insight into the main SENCO responsibilities. <i>Q15: Tell me about the role of the SENCO? What does he/she do? Prompts to include: Post of responsibility?; Full teaching timetable or time allocated to role?; Administrative responsibilities?; Management responsibilities?; Main priorities?; Do they provide professional learning?</i>
Q18 & 20	These questions referred to the key enablers of the SENCO role that were identified from Phase One, such as 'support from the principal' and the principals were asked to provide some context around this and insight into what a supportive principal looks like. <i>Q18: In Phase One (the survey) the area of 'support from the Principal' came through as a factor that effectively facilitates the SENCO role. What would be your view on this? From your own perspective what does being a supportive Principal look like?</i> <i>Q20: The survey identified that working collaboratively with others came through as a factor that facilitates SENCOs to fulfil their role. What is your view on this? What has been your experience of this? How does collaboration between SLT, SENCO and SEN team affect outcomes for pupils? Are there any other things that effectively facilitate the SENCO role?</i>
Q21	This question drew on the Phase One findings regarding the key barriers to the SENCO role identified from Phase One, such as lack of time, and sought to examine, from the principals' perspective, if the SENCO role was impacted and why due to these barriers. The principals were also asked how the school worked to overcome and/ or deal with these challenges. <i>Q21: The survey identified that the main barriers to effective execution of the SENCO role were time constraints, having multiple roles and responsibilities and inadequate</i>

	<i>support for external professional services for staff and pupils. Has your school encountered any of these barriers or others? Can you tell me how they have impacted the SENCO role? How has your school overcome these challenges or dealt with them?</i>
Q22	This question drew on the Phase One findings regarding a barrier identified in Phase One related to the rotation of staff in the SEN team. The principals were asked for their insights into this and how staff rotation works in their school and whether it impacts on the SENCO role. <i>Q22: The survey indicated that the rotation of staff in the SEN team was a barrier to effective SENCO role enactment. What are your thoughts on this?</i>
Q26	In this question reference was made to the finding from Phase One which indicated that SENCOs potentially have insufficient time to work with the SLT. The Principals were asked to provide insight into how the SENCO works with the SLT in their school. <i>Q26: The survey indicated that the SENCO has insufficient time to work with Senior Leadership. Does your SENCO meet with the SLT and if so how often? Tell me about how the SENCO works with the SLT?</i>
Q29	In this question the findings from Phase One related to the percentage of SENCOs who felt there was a need for a SENCO specific third-level postgraduate programme was detailed. The Principals were asked if such a programme was needed and if so why. <i>Q29: The survey showed that 75% of SENCOs think there is a need for a SENCO specific third level postgraduate programme. Do you think there is a need for this and why?</i>

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter detailed the findings from Phase One of this study. Descriptive and inferential statistical findings are provided together with thematic analysis findings pertaining to the enablers and barriers to SENCO role enactment. The SENCOs in Irish primary schools are experienced, knowledgeable and generally hold post of responsibilities and are part of the senior leadership team in the schools. It is clear that there is significant interaction, support and collaboration between the SENCO and staff at the microsystem level, which facilitates the SENCO in his/ her role. Teacher professional learning was identified as an enabler and the SENCOs' interactions with communities of practice and third-level institutions is occurring at the mesosystem level. The lack of policy and formalisation of the role from the exosystem level together with the multiple roles and responsibilities undertaken by SENCOs act as

barriers to SENCO role enactment. There should be active engagement with external professional services and agencies in the mesosystem level but the data points to a thinly populated mesosystem with these agencies residing out of reach of the SENCOs, pupils and parents in the exosystem. It is evident that this ambiguous and limited policy guidance is impacting on the practices and realities for SENCOs in their school microsystem. The findings outlined in this chapter identified initial insight into the experiences of SENCOs and the in-depth analysis of the related findings from Phase Two (interviews), presented in the next chapter, provide rich and meaningful insight into these experiences to further our understanding of the realities, experiences, practices and challenges of the SENCO role. In the Discussion Chapter (Chapter Seven) these findings presented in this chapter are discussed and integrated with the findings from Phase Two (Chapter Six) and with reference to the theoretical framework for this research, namely Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory.

CHAPTER SIX: PHASE TWO FINDINGS

6.0 Introduction

This chapter examines SENCOs' (SENCOs and SENCO Principals) and Principals' perspectives of the role of the SENCO in Irish primary schools. Semi-structured interviews (n= 9) were undertaken with SENCOs (n=3), SENCO Principals (n=3) and Principals (n=3) to enhance our understanding of the duties and practices within the SENCO role; to explore the facilitators and barriers in executing the role; to explore the learning needs of the SENCOs in an evolving policy and practice landscape and the implications for future professional learning; and to gain insights from SENCOs and Principals on the future of the SENCO role. The previous chapter presented findings from Phase One of data collection, the online survey distributed nationally, which informed the interview schedule for the qualitative data collection phase that followed. While the data from Phase One gave an overview of the profile of SENCOs and their responsibilities and practices, to gain greater insight into SENCOs' lived experiences it was necessary to interview SENCOs in the role and also Principals in schools. In-depth analysis of the data and emerging themes, theoretically framed by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (2005) have implications extending across many systems.

I engaged in RTA (Braun and Clarke 2020) to examine what SENCOs do, what supports them to do this, what does not support them and what may support SENCOs going forward. The qualitative data analysis process brought about four key themes and 14 sub-themes which are presented in this chapter. In Table 6.1 the four defined and named themes, which were developed in Phase Five of the data analysis process (Braun and Clarke 2020) are detailed. These were informed by 156 codes in Phase Two, reduced to 26 categories in Phase Three and further reduced to 10 potential themes (categories) in Phase Four of the thematic analysis process. In total there were 1,205 citations coded. In the following chapter abbreviations are used for the participant groups as follows: S = SENCO; SP = SENCO Principal, and P = Principal.

Table 6.1: Emerging categories and defined themes.

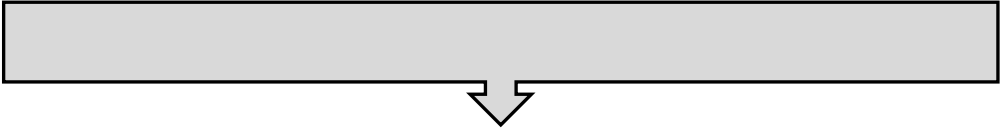
Categories/ Initial Themes		Interviews Coded	Citations Coded
Impact of Policy Changes and SETAM		9	91
Inclusive Practices		9	159
Perceptions of the SENCO Role: Staff and SENCOs' Perceptions		7	45
Principals' views on how they work with the SENCO Role		9	141
Professional Learning		9	159
SENCO Future Vision		9	92
SENCO Role: Duties and Responsibilities		9	235
SENCO role challenges and barriers		9	92
SENCO Role Enablers		9	42
			
Defined Themes			
Theme 1:	SENCOs are leading and managing school-wide collaborative approaches to SEN provision.		
Theme 2:	Experienced, knowledgeable and connected SENCOs are enabled by supportive staff and principals and a culture of collaboration.		
Theme 3:	The extensive, nebulous nature of the SENCO role has evolved in a policy vacuum with insufficient time and inadequate support from external professional services.		
Theme 4:	Principals' and SENCOs' insights into future directions of the role.		

Figure 6.1 presents a conceptual map of the four themes that emerged from the data analysis. This map outlines the four themes but also shows the relationships and connections between the themes. Theme One relates to the roles and responsibilities of the SENCOs and this feeds into both the SENCO role enablers and barriers. Conversely, both the enablers and barriers influence the SENCO role and what they do and thus there is a connection between all three themes. As the arrows

illustrate all three themes feed into and impact on the final theme, namely ‘Where to now?’. The SENCOs’ lived experiences of the role, together with the enablers and barriers, and the Principals’ perceptions of the role from their own lived experiences impact on all the participants’ insights into the future directions of the SENCO role.

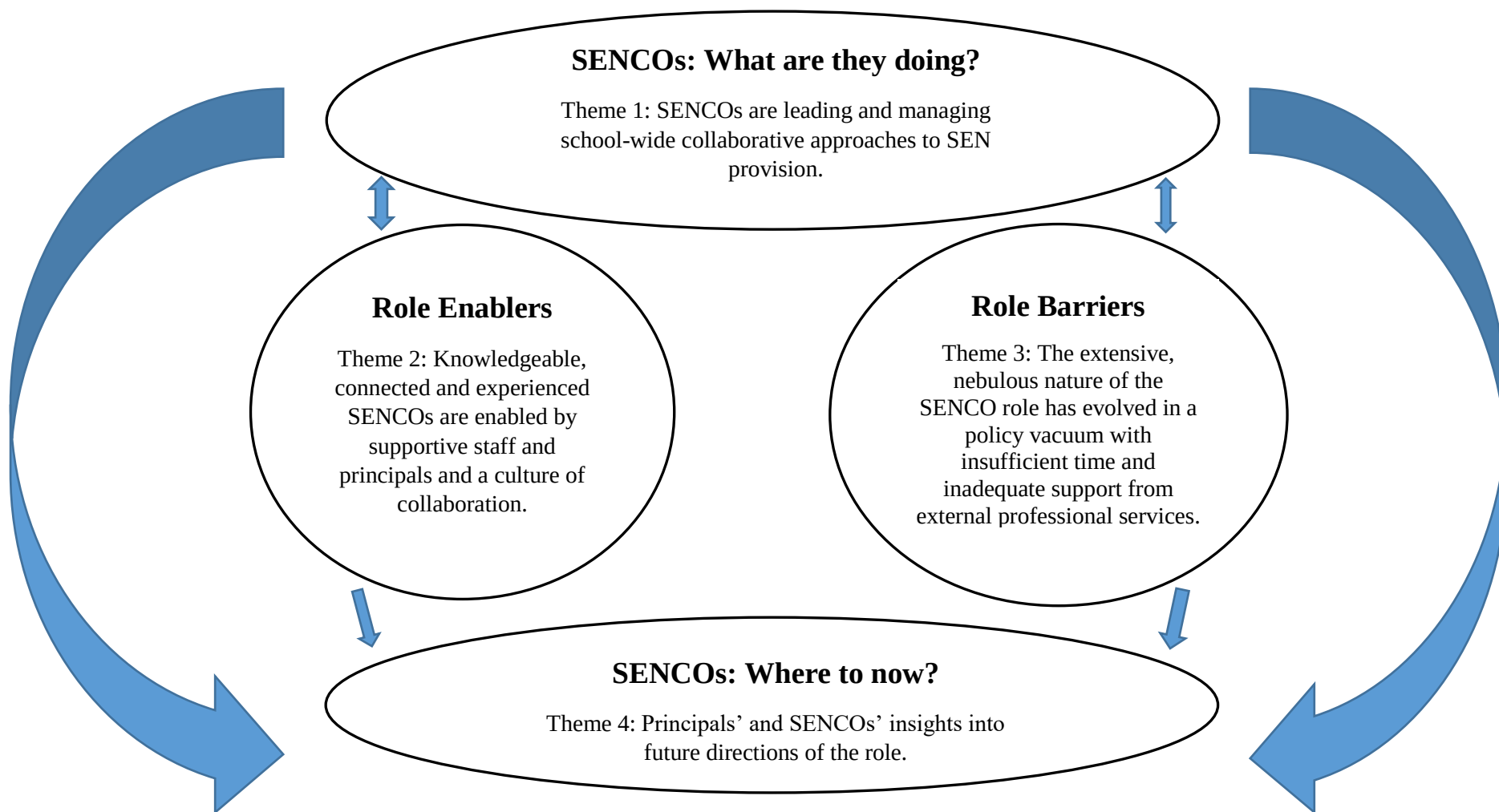


Figure 6.1: Conceptual map of themes.

Finally, in Figure 6.2 below the number of citations coded for each theme is displayed. It is evident here that both Theme One and Theme Two had the highest number of citations followed by Theme Three and then Theme Four.

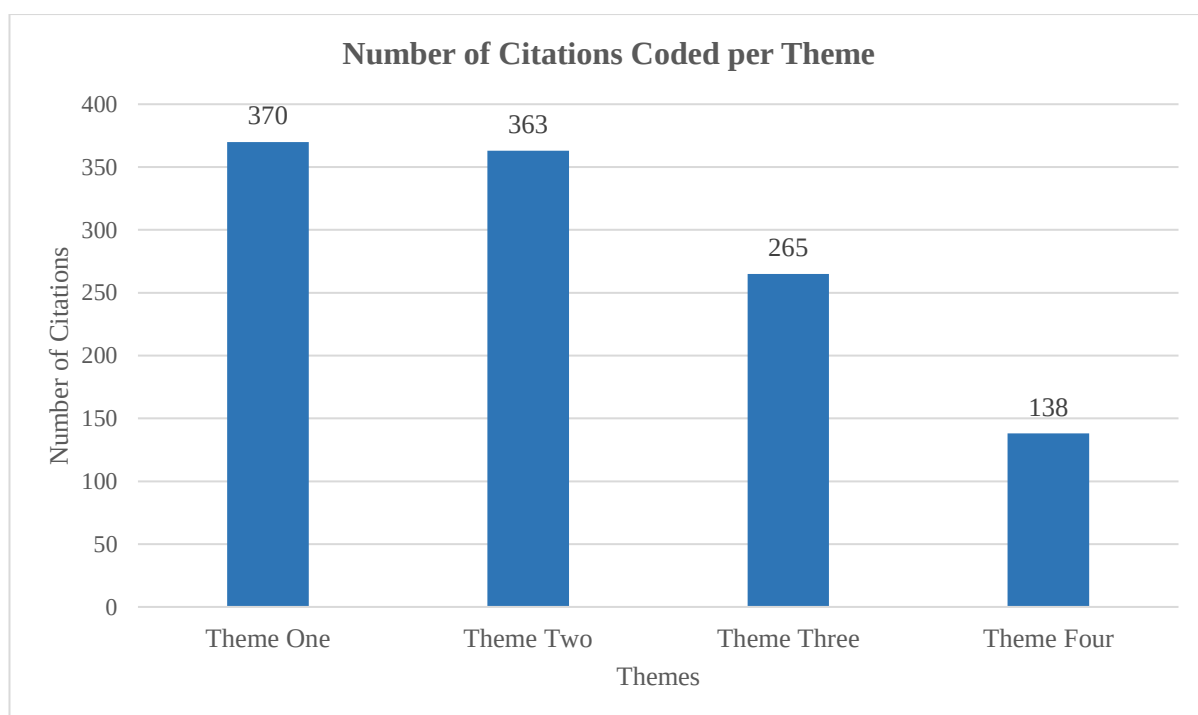


Figure 6.2: Number of citations coded per theme.

6.1 Theme One: SENCOs are leading and managing school-wide collaborative approaches to SEN provision

‘...if anyone says anything SEN they all say straight away go to the SENCO. It's all the staff, they see me as the leader.’

(S3, SENCO)

It could be suggested from this quotation that the SENCO is viewed as the leader of SEN by all staff within this particular school. Throughout the interviews, it is clear that all SENCOs and Principals align to the view that the leader and manager of SEN within the schools is the SENCO. All the Principals indicated that the SENCO is the expert and specialist and due to this is the leader in the area of SEN. Specifically, one Principal noted that,

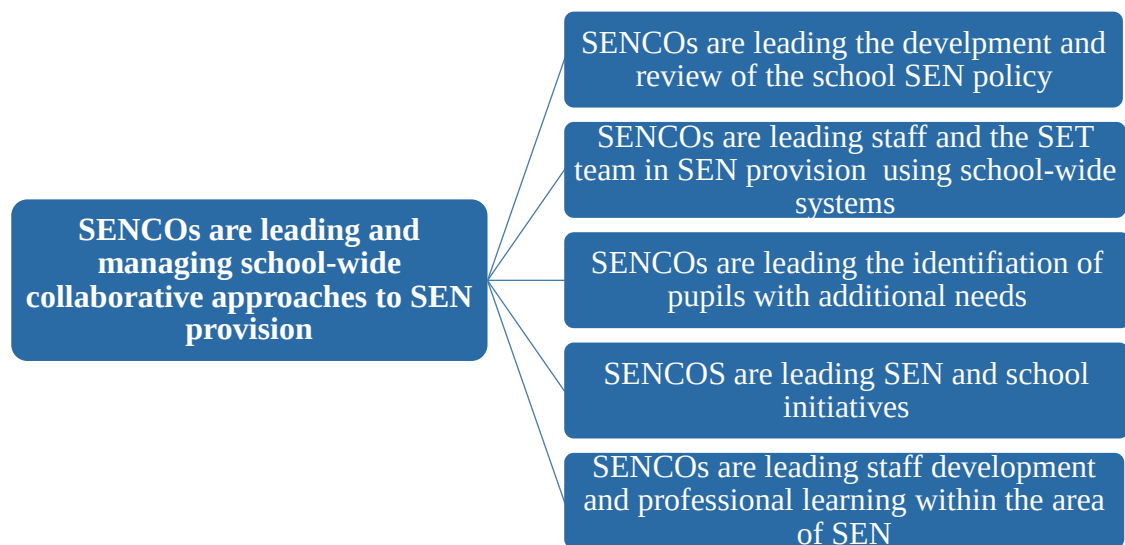


Figure 6.4: Theme One and related sub-themes.

The findings presented in this first theme set out to answer the following research question:

- What are the specific roles and responsibilities of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?

6.1.1 SENCOs are leading the development and review of the school SEN policy

The importance of leading the process of devising and reviewing the SEN policy in schools strongly emerged from the data. All participants shared that the SENCO leads the development and review of the SEN policy. This important task, which forms the SEN vision and strategy for the schools, is *'falling to the SENCO'* who has *'the oversight of the review'* (P2, Principal). In School H, the Principal (P2) outlined that the SEN policy review is handed over to the Principal from the Board of Management who *'then delegates it further, so it goes right down to our SENCO at the moment, who is actually carrying out a review of it at the moment'*. All SENCOs conveyed that the development and review of the SEN policy is their responsibility. S1 (SENCO) stated, *'I review it (SEN policy) in conjunction with the Deputy Principal, but like it is down to me'* and then *'I am just making sure that it is being followed'*. Another

Principal (P3) commented, *'she (SENCO) coordinates the whole SEN policy within the school, she commenced the policy that we put together in our school'*.

This is also echoed in School F where the SENCO Principal (SP3) indicated that *'I would make sure that the policy is in place and it's up to date...I would review that every year and...make sure everyone has a copy of it'*. The role that the SENCO plays in leading the implementation and review of the SEN policy was clearly articulated by P2 (Principal) who said *'the SENCO does such a remarkable job in co-ordinating the approach for the school, you know, there isn't really much need to deviate from the plan too much'*. The data suggests that the SENCOs are leading this strategic short to long-term plan for SEN in their schools, which can span for up to 5 years. The SENCOs are clearly influencing practice, policy and procedures in their schools' microsystem, which highlights the important role that they are playing in advancing inclusive practices.

In School H, the Principal (P2) outlined the SEN policy review process that the SENCO led. In this school, a whole-school evaluation around the time of the introduction of SETAM documented that the SEN policy did not align with the Continuum of Support. The policy was revised by the SENCO who then collaboratively worked with a team to further review the policy and make amendments. This approach perhaps is indicative of the SENCO changing the school SEN policy and thus the SEN strategy and plan, to align with changes in policy at the exosystem, such as the implementation of the Continuum of Support as a result of policy changes in 2017 (SETAM). Other changes in practice that emerged from the data, which stemmed from changes in policy that the SENCOs also managed, was the implementation of Irish Exemption guidance. In certain circumstances, such as pupils experiencing significant literacy difficulties or having a high level of multiple needs, the school management can grant this pupil an exemption from studying the Irish language. Specifically, P2 (Principal) recounted that the school's SEN policy did not reflect the changes made to practice in schools in 2017 after the introduction of SETAM, as follows:

'Once the continuum of support that came in, it was around the time of our WSE and our policy didn't reflect the continuum. So that rattled myself and the SENCO and we did an awful lot of the work in getting the policy together. Now it's quite lengthy. And that's the policy that's been in place since 2017. So the SENCO would have started that review, as I said a few weeks ago because it

just reflects how different practises have changed since then and also to make it more accessible. So that's falling to the SENCO. She has a team working with her as well in the school with that so and at the end of that policy review we get teams working on it. She has got the oversight of the review and then it comes to me and then we bring it to the board. So that's the chain.'

(P2, Principal)

I interpreted from these data that the SENCOs were enacting changes in their school microsystem resulting from changes that were happening at the exosystem level with the introduction of new policies from the Department of Education, e.g. SETAM. It was suggested from the data that changes in guidance from the Department of Education, impacted on the operational experience within the school's microsystem. The SENCOs' roles were evolving and being impacted by the changing policies and the resulting expectations within the microsystem. It could be inferred that these policy changes at the exosystem level were influenced by wider societal attitudes, political ideologies and international accords related to inclusion at the macrosystem level. Changes at the macrosystem level impacted all other layers of the ecosystem, i.e. a trickle-down effect to schools' systems and individuals.

Across all schools, both Principals and SENCOs spoke of the importance of devising and developing the SEN Policy in a collaborative manner that includes all members of the microsystem of the school. SENCOs work collaboratively to develop, review and revise their SEN policy. In School G, the Principal (P1) talked about how the SENCO leads the SEN policy and plans to include voices of parents and pupils in the school's revised and updated SEN policy. This is suggestive of a move towards developing a more inclusive school-wide collaborative approach which includes all key members of the microsystem by the SENCOs to develop the SEN policy and plan for their school. Specifically, Principal (P1) commented,

'So the SENCO and myself and in consultation with staff will update the SEN policy and it would be brought to the board for ratification, but we would also...want the voice of parents in there. We want the voice of pupils in there. So that is a newer approach that we are trying to bring in. So it would be brought to the PA and there would be a call for voices, there, we have a student council. So that the voices of others are heard more than they might have been in the past. So that was something we just discussed today as 'a to do' for next year.'

(P1, Principal)

In School B, the SENCO (S2) noted that when reviewing the SEN policy '*I worked very closely with the SET teachers and my Principal*'. Within this SEN policy, the SENCO laid out '*the roles and responsibilities for all the different practices within the school*'. This SENCO was innovative in her approach as she included full descriptions of roles and responsibilities including her own roles and responsibilities as SENCO in the SEN policy. It suggests that this SENCO was attempting to formalise her role within her own school microsystem so that the remit of her role was clearly identified and transparent for all staff. In turn, this reflects the SENCO advancing the SENCO role from the ground up and providing insight into the conceptualisation of the SENCO role within the school. The SENCO provided the text in relation to this during the interview and the description of the role from her SEN policy is as follows:

'So the SENCO is responsible for the day-to-day operation of school's SEN policy and they coordinate additional support for pupils with SEN and liaise with their parents, teachers and other professionals who are involved. SENCO will maintain a list of pupils who are receiving supplementary teaching and or special education services. They will help to coordinate the caseloads, work schedules of the support teachers. They will support the implementation of the continuum of support at whole-school level, to monitor the progress of children with learning difficulties. They will keep teachers informed about the external assessment services that are available and the procedures to be followed in initiating referrals. They will advise parents on procedures for availing of special education needs services. They will liaise with external agencies such as psychological services, OTs, SLTs to arrange observations, assessments and special provision of pupils with special needs. They will arrange for classroom accommodation and resources as appropriate. They will contribute to in-service training of staff. They will provide support and mentoring to new special needs teachers and they will facilitate and chair regular meetings of the SET team within the school and they were coordinate in cooperation with the principal the timetables of support for support teachers.'

(S2, SENCO)

What is interesting here is that the SENCO developed this from her own interpretation of the SENCO role and it is perhaps reflective of how the role operates within her own school microsystem. It could be inferred from this that the SENCO is developed the role from the ground up in response to a policy vacuum regarding the expectations of the SENCO role.

6.1.2 SENCOs are leading staff and the SET team in the provision of special education using school-wide systems

In this section, data is presented regarding how SENCOs are leading staff in the provision of SEN using school-wide systems and collaborative approaches. The SENCOs were responsible for the SEN coordination throughout the schools. The findings in the section are presented in two sections as follows:

- SENCOs are leading school staff in the provision of special education using collaborative approaches; and
- SENCOs are leading and managing the SET team in the provision of special education using systems and collaborative approaches.

SENCOs are leading school staff in the provision of SEN using collaborative approaches

Collaborative training and meetings

Each of the participating schools had a SET team, which was led by the SENCO, that implemented inclusive practices by collaboratively working throughout the school to provide the additional supports for pupils with SEN. The importance of the development of school-wide systems strongly emerged from the data. The Principal (P3) in School I, explained that both he and the SENCO *‘try and create time’* to set up and schedule *‘collaborative training’*, *‘collaborative meetings of all the staff together’* and find time that could be built into a system for school-wide collaborations to routinely occur. He clearly articulated,

‘The time we have really to use is Croke Park hours which is part of collaborative training, and we would every month have a least one collaborative meeting of all the staff together and then break into groups. The other thing we have is the infant hour, the infant hour is invaluable to us because we have a lot of situations where the infant teachers might come in and supervise for an hour. That allows first class, second, class etc. or testing to come and meet with the SET team and discuss where they are going, how they are going to plan going forward. It is hard to structure that because there are so many things happening in schools and school life is busy but we sit down myself and the SENCO and, we structure and organise it.’

(P3, Principal)

The data illustrates that SET teams are using collaborative practices in the coordination of the SEN provision and this coordination could not be undertaken unless there were discussions and meetings taking place with all staff on the overall

picture of the needs in the school and the actual tasks performed by the SET team itself. SP2 (SENCO Principal) stated that,

‘The biggest, I would say the biggest responsibility I have is making sure that teachers are aware of the needs in the school, that it is not just a three or four in the classroom. It is us as a school together. How do we meet all the needs in the school together and to share the support in the areas that need it the most.’

(SP2, SENCO Principal)

P3 (Principal) outlined that the SENCO in School I needed to create a lot of structures around collaborative practice to coordinate teams which takes substantial time and noted,

‘...there is a lot of structure around collaborative practice (co-teaching) and there is a lot more time needed to plan for the collaborative practices (co-teaching), because you have 3-4 teachers coming together in a class situation and while teachers are getting used to that, it needs planning time, and it also needs buy in from class teachers. Sometimes mainstream class teachers find that difficult because it is almost like your class is being taken over, you are losing control, so it takes trust. So that builds up over time, its building that system, so that now more than it was five years ago, so it comes to being accepted that it is going to be collaborative teaching in your class.’

(P3, Principal)

This again is indicative of policy changes coming from the exosystem, regarding the promotion of increasing collaborative practices and teaching within the school’s microsystem and the, at times, challenging management of these practices.

Four out of six SENCOs (S1, S2, S3 and SP3) outlined that they ensured that they meet with mainstream class teachers and the SET teachers. S2 (SENCO) explained that in facilitating this she could maximise collaboration and minimise the time the SET teachers were not in contact with pupils. She stated,

‘And what as SENCO what I have tried to do is to have blocks of time at the start and the end of term and to minimise the lack of contact and to maximise collaboration. So I think once every six weeks, Friday evenings the SENCO can collaborate either with the SET teachers or with their class teachers. It can be hard to manage because class teachers do not get that specific time in our school. I do not think they get it in a lot of schools, so I manage a lot of that collaboration on the Friday meeting.’

(S2, SENCO)

In School I, the Principal illustrated that the SENCO used both formal and informal systems to facilitate staff collaboration, with meetings and discussions that were timetabled and scheduled in to work practices. I interpreted from this that the SENCO is being given the opportunity, by a supportive Principal, to inform and influence collaborative approaches in the provision of SEN across the school microsystem. In relation to this, P3 stated,

‘The SENCO would meet maybe twice a term where all the SET team would come together and to discuss what they are doing and how they are doing it. With regards staff, yes, it is something we are building into our staff meetings in the sense that the SET team can report back and say what they are doing, this system has just started to be built in.’

(P3, Principal)

Data indicates that SENCOs in all participating schools lead the co-ordination of the SET team using school-wide systems such as meetings and that coordination of the SET team was one of the most important roles for the SENCO. This is reflected in the following quotation from one of the SENCO Principals:

‘I think as a SENCO...what might be important would be leading the SEN team and organising that. I think if that's done properly, then the SET Teachers will spill out into the classrooms and lead SET in the classrooms and with the mainstream class teacher.’

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

P3 (Principal) acknowledged that for this ‘spill out’ to occur it is important for the SENCO to develop systems for staff collaboration. This Principal (P3) also noted in reference to SET team co-ordination that ‘the SENCO would be leading that. The SENCO will lead that and she would coordinate that’. Collaboratively leading and coordinating the SET team and its importance was noted by S2 (SENCO) when she declared,

‘So that's my main post of responsibility as coordinator of SEN...collaboratively coordinating the special education teachers, their timetables and how the support is divided amongst all the children.’

(S2, SENCO)

SENCOs are leading and managing the SET team in the provision of SEN using systems and collaborative approaches

The participants in Schools A, B, C, F, G, H and I, all outlined during the interviews that the SENCO is pivotal in creating systems across the school. The Principal in School I commented on how the SENCO can get systems in place that can increase productivity resulting in things running more efficiently when they are dealing with numerous people across the microsystem and trying to reach those within the mesosystem. P3 (Principal) stated,

‘When the SENCO gets systems in place, I think people then become more, productive and quicker. They work on quicker ways...it's huge in terms of the amount of people you are dealing with.’

(P3, Principal)

Importance of meetings and communication

Each participant indicated that the SENCOs arranged for the SET team to meet frequently to discuss the coordination of special education provision. Some schools met more frequently than others did, but all participants stated that they had at least termly meetings, which ensured that there was consistency within the practice of the SET team during the year. S3 (SENCO) outlined the main tasks that the SET team discussed on a termly basis, which were assessments that occur at the start of the year, formulating support plans, and sharing those plans using technology. Specifically S3 stated,

‘Yes, we have meetings kind of termly and if needed, more. We meet in September to kind of go through everything and the testing and how to formulate support plans and then we'd meet again at Christmas to make sure everyone had uploaded the plans to Aladdin and to make sure everything is kind of coordinated effectively.’

(S3, SENCO)

The participants in Schools A, B, D, E, G, H, and I, all spoke of having ‘collaborative meetings’ and ‘collaborative discussions’. SENCO (S3) illustrated that there is an understanding between her and the SET team that meetings are planned in a collaborative manner. S3, (SENCO) noted ‘I'd always make sure the week beforehand to go to everyone and make sure if there is anything you need support with, anything you want to bring up at the meeting’. The SET team meetings provided

an opportunity where the team could discuss if they have questions or any issues that may have arisen and also an opportunity to solve problems collaboratively and make decisions collectively. S3 noted,

‘I find SET team meetings brilliant for getting us together and actually getting the team to voice if there are problems. They are brilliant to kind of problem solve together as a group and it does make things that bit easier because then I know, okay I need to bring this in or I need to talk to them about this.’

(S3, SENCO)

In Schools A, B, C, D, F, G, and H the participants noted that the SET team meetings had benefits for the SET team and in the school. The meetings opened up opportunities for the SET team to have a *‘safe space just to chat about different practices within classrooms and in withdrawal groups’* (S2, SENCO). The meetings also gave the opportunity for the SENCO and team to work together collaboratively. S2 (SENCO) stated that,

‘And do ye meet (SET Team) every week... on a Friday if people need clarity on anything and we work together on that. So there's a lot of collaboration at that Friday meeting, helping each other out as well with different things.’

(S2, SENCO)

SEN induction training for staff

The systems approach that is suggested in the data was reflected when S1 (SENCO) and S3 (SENCO) organised and co-ordinated a SET team induction pack that was provided to all new SET team members and all staff. This was developed to establish consistency across the SET team and across school-wide systems. S1 (SENCO) referred to developing what they termed a *‘SEN starter pack’*, which contained information on templates and procedures for SEN in the school. This form of co-ordination was designed to ensure that the SEN approach throughout the school was consistent and is an example of how the SENCO was innovative and progressive in their approach.

Developing the school provision plan

Having assessed, identified, prioritised and met with parents and external agencies, SENCOs still need to coordinate the team that will be involved in teaching and supporting the identified pupils. According to S3 (SENCO), once identification of the

pupils needing support had taken place, she then set out the school provision plan. Regarding this S3 stated,

'I am heavily involved, I identify in June along with the other SETs all the children that need support for the next year. I set out the school provision plan for the year ahead and make sure all the staff, class teachers and SETs, know exactly when different things need to be done, like when support plans need to be done, when testing needs to be done, what type of testing needs to be done. If there is any kind of queries they know to come to me...So it is really collaborative.'

(S3, SENCO)

According to the SENCO Principal in School D, leading and coordinating the school provision plan can be challenging due to needs arising throughout the school year. SP1 (SENCO Principal) noted,

'You sit down in September and assess your resources and you identified those kids or those classes most at need and go from there...but to a certain extent, you are fire-fighting because a child that mightn't have needed support in September could need support in January. Or you could have a child's that had no report in January you have report that comes across your desk.'

(SP1, SENCO Principal)

In School G, the Principal commented on collaborative practices within the school, which are ongoing throughout the year, with the SENCO and the team aligning the school's provision of supports (plan) to meet the needs. P1 (Principal) recounted that the SENCO,

'Oversees the allocation of resources, teaching time, the type of sessions, the testing, so there is a huge amount in it. She would analyse results and along with the SEN team, they see about allocating of hours for children whether literacy, numeracy or other additional needs, wellbeing groups and so on and would do so three main times a year'.

(P1, Principal)

Coordinating the SET teams strengths to the areas of need

S3 (SENCO), SP3 (SENCO Principal) and P3 (Principal) spoke of the importance of identifying the strengths within the SET team and aligning these to the areas of need when co-ordinating the SET team. SP1 (SENCO Principal) stated *'coordinating the SET team to match the areas of support needed to the SET team strengths'* was an important aspect in the coordination provision. Ensuring that *'all children within the system get the time that they need and access and then linking that information back*

up to parents' was identified by P3 (Principal) as an important task for the SENCO when leading the co-ordination of the SET team.

Timetabling and caseload management

Throughout the interviews, the data indicates that timetabling and caseload management were central aspects for the SENCOs in co-ordinating the SET team. The participants in Schools A, B, C, F, H, and I discussed how this was completed in a collaborative manner with the support teams, which often included both SETs and SNAs. Specifically, P2 (Principal) commented,

'The SENCO coordinates the timetabling of our SETs and the caseload that they might receive...it is divided out as fairly as possible. The SENCO then would meet the SETs and the SNAs to make sure it is not just handed to them there's actually a discussion about the year coming and how they're getting on. It is a massive job. I don't know how she does it is like a military campaign.'

(P2, Principal)

Another Principal (P3) reported that timetabling is a significant duty for the SENCO when they noted, *'co-ordinating, obviously the timetables now that is a huge, huge job to do within the school because we have 594 pupils and you can have 24 classes and SEN'*. All SENCOs co-ordinated the organisation and timetabling of in-class supports and curricular initiatives collaboratively with the SET team. I sensed from this that there was a culture of a distribution of tasks between the SENCO and the SET team. In relation to this, S1 (SENCO) said,

'...we have a discussion about, okay, what kind of in-class support are we going to offer first and then the SETs go off with within their small subgroup and they really kind of organise their own timetables.'

(S1, SENCO)

The SENCOs indicated that the many changes in school-wide initiatives during the term or year can bring about many changes to the SET team. It can be a challenge to coordinate the team while still ensuring that each class has sufficient provision. S3 (SENCO) noted,

'In coordinating the team, there's an awful lot of changes which links in with the whole-school initiatives because, like if you're literacy lift off...you're constantly trying to make sure that every class is adequately supported. They're very interlinked I think in a way that the whole-school initiatives are

brilliant and they're extremely necessary, but it does mean a lot of chopping and changing for the team.'

(S3, SENCO)

Support files and plans

All of the participants indicated that the SENCO in each school is leading the development and review of support plans for pupils in need of additional supports. S3 (SENCO) stated, *'I'm leading to make sure that all teachers have got their support plans done'*. SENCOs in Schools A, B, C and F noted that they were tasked with ensuring that there was consistency across the school in how teachers are developing and devising the student support plans. One SENCO (S3) discussed how she developed sample plans relating to various areas of the curriculum and various additional supports and noted that this was helpful to the SET teachers and mainstream teachers. S3 (SENCO) added,

'To get it started I had made sample plans, let's say, for literacy, for behaviour, for maths, so that all staff have access to sample plans for at least a starting point.'

(S3, SENCO)

The SENCO in School C outlined the importance of reminding the SET team about devising the support plans and when the plans and reviews were due for submission. S3 (SENCO) reported that she would, *'have a look around the support plans to make sure that they're done properly and the targets are smart'*. Aligned to this, S1 (SENCO) stated that they were giving, *'reminders, to constantly keep an eye on your targets and that it is in your support plan and that it's being reflected in your short-term planning'*. The SENCOs in Schools A, B, C and D and F indicated that they were reminding SET teachers to upload their monthly planning and support plans onto the electronic system to ensure that anybody that needed access to the information could do so. The data here could suggest that the SENCOs appear to be 'busy' with administrative tasks and potentially micro-managing the activities within the SET team. This could potentially impact on the time available for the SENCOs to reflect on and evaluate the impact of this busy work.

Using technology systems for storing and sharing pupil information

For the SENCOs, co-ordinating the SET team and developing systems for efficiency also involved using technology for storage and access of student information and

support plans. In Schools A, B, C, F, G, and I it was the responsibility of the SENCO to set-up online student files and upskill staff on how to access these files. One SENCO in particular (S1) talked about how she developed an *'Aladdin quick guide'* to coordinate this process and support SET and mainstream teachers. Again, this is an example of the SENCO being progressive, professional and innovative in leading the coordination of SEN provision in their school. Specifically (S1) remarked,

'We have Aladdin new just for the last two years. That was a whole other, steep learning curve. So, organisation really is the biggest part of my role and organising, the different templates, making sure people knew how to access them and how to fill them in. So I created an Aladdin quick guide, how to create a classroom's support plan or support plan or how to assign yourself as a SET to a class or to a child.'

(S1, SENCO)

P1 (Principal) provided another example of the SENCO using their initiative and thus showing their leadership by developing the systems within Aladdin to support communication and thus collaboration between all staff regarding student information. Regarding this, P1 commented that their SENCO, who is only in the role two years, *'has digitised a lot and so we have logs of action within Aladdin'*. P1 further commented that it has now,

'become way easier from year to year to have that hand over with children. Nothing's falling through the gaps. The log of actions is very helpful, and so that's how we'd really communicate.'

(P1, Principal)

A summary of the various school-wide systems developed by SENCOs across all schools to lead and co-ordinate SEN provision for all staff is presented in Figure 6.5.



Figure 6.5: School-wide systems of collaboration developed and led by the SENCOs.

6.1.3 SENCOs are leading the identification of pupils with additional needs

It was apparent from the data that the identification of pupils with additional needs was a significant and main responsibility of the SENCOs in leading SEN provision in the participating schools. SP3 (SENCO Principal) commented, *‘when you’re leading them (SEN team)...you’re making sure the right children are being taken out, you’re making sure that all children are catered for’*. This was echoed by SP1 (SENCO Principal) when she noted, *‘leadership in SEN would be identifying the needs of the pupils and developing a programme around those needs’*. In order to ensure that all children are identified SENCOs are responsible for coordinating and leading the

assessment that actually identifies which pupils are in need of additional support. SP3 (SENCO Principal) stated,

'And to make sure as a leader, make sure that the teachers have got all the resources that they need in their classroom or in their SET room and to make sure to review on their Drumcondra results in Maths and English. Maybe look at the NNRIT and to see, is there a child with an average NNRIT, that's really down in their English and what's going on here. Just to make sure that all children are picked up.'

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

The participants in Schools A, B, C, D, F, G, H, and I indicated that organising and analysing assessments in order to identify pupils that need additional supports within the school was an integral part of the SENCOs role. S3 (SENCO) stated, *'Identifying the needs and organising the testing and analysing the testing is a huge part of the role'*. In School G, the Principal (P1) outlined the importance of the SENCO having knowledge on assessments, knowing which assessments to use and supporting teachers in the use of these assessments when identifying children in need of support. I sensed that this Principal respected the knowledge held by this SENCO, knowledge that can be developed on specific SEN courses. P1 (Principal) declared,

'Our SENCO used to be a NEPS so she knows all the tests and all the assessments. She will organise that. She replaced the Schonell recently. She would have the suite of assessments that we choose when needed. She is well able to administer and is able to help some of our other teachers administer tests too. And the WIAT. She's also able to administer the WIAT.'

(P1, Principal)

With the increased autonomy within schools, SENCOs are responsible for *'identifying the children for support and being able to place the needs of the children in the correct category and how the teachers attend to that'* (S2, SENCO). A central aspect of this responsibility is that SENCOs need to ensure that *'children with the most needs...are being met in an adequate and excellent way'* (P1, Principal). S1 (SENCO) reiterated this and commented that it involves *'making sure that the children who are school support plus are getting the greatest level of attention'*. SENCOs are tasked with the responsibility of managing the identification of all needs, including care needs of pupils and aligning resources and staff, across the microsystem, in a manner that meets these needs effectively. P2 (Principal) indicated that the SENCO,

‘...looks at the care needs of all the children we have in the school. Prioritise them in terms of needs and try to give them as much time and access to SET or SNA as we can.’

(P2, Principal)

The participants in Schools A, C, F, G, H and I discussed in their interviews that it is the responsibility of the SENCOs to coordinate timetables for pupils and support staff, but meetings and discussions take place with the relevant staff before agreeing on the timetable for all. The data revealed that the SENCOs are creating systems that can facilitate collaborative discussions and meetings for both SET and class teachers in order to identify pupils in need of support. In School C, the SENCO asserted,

‘The collaborative planning does make things easier, the class teachers have to come to me, it was only this year I brought that in. They (class teachers) get time to meet their SET and they said it was brilliant, that they really got to go through and identify each child, they were then able to create their literacy groups during that time...so very collaborative process.’

(S3, SENCO)

I interpret from this data that a distribution of tasks through collaborative practices is making this SENCO’s job easier as it appears that supportive colleagues are buying into these practices. I wonder what the SENCOs job would be like here if the staff were not supportive in these collaborations. The Principal in School I noted that the SENCO is also making decisions in relation to the allocation of SNAs within the school. P3 (Principal) outlined that this often involves the SENCO assigning SNAs to *‘children coming in who have no diagnosis’* as otherwise *‘they won’t access the curriculum or remain in the school because of behavioural difficulties and the SNA is integral to that support’* (P3). P3 followed this up by noting that this can result in the SENCOs *‘taking time off other children and you have to explain to parents why...so that’s quite stressful’*. It is questionable if SENCO and the SET team working in the microsystem are filling in for absent interactions between the microsystem and the mesosystem regarding the availability of external supports outside of the school setting. It could result in affecting others in the microsystem. The Principal in School (P3), in the absence of a home school liaison officer indicated that the SENCO is adopting a *‘pastoral role’* and that this *‘has become bigger’* due to the *‘time involved in meeting people...and working out where the difficulty and problems are and on how we can support that, through TUSLA or Bernardo’s’* (P3, Principal). I sense from this

that this SENCO was acting as an ‘advocacy leader’ by problem-solving to seek solutions and a way forward for these pupils to support them within the school microsystem.

The participants indicated that collaboration was essential in the identification, prioritisation and planning for pupils. S2 (SENCO) remarked that,

‘I think now you have to collaborate an awful lot with your class teachers in order to get, your parents and your children, in order to get a broader picture of their difficulties and where they're struggling.’

(S2, SENCO)

Throughout the identification process the participants in Schools A, B, C, F, G, H and I indicated that collaborative practices occurred between staff. In School A, F, G the SENCOs noted that collaboration not only happened between teachers within the school but also with outside agencies, such as NEPS, and parents. SP3 (SENCO Principal) noted,

‘I would liaise with the NEPS psychologist and that is always after discussion with the SET team or with the class teachers with regard who I put forward for assessment. Or maybe we might have collaborative meetings with the NEPS psychologist and the parents, you know, because maybe it's the behavioural problem, but it's always through collaboration with the SET teachers, So I think that's important in my role as well. You know it's liaising with outside agencies as the need arises.’

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

I sensed that this collaboration did not happen very often and only when they were at a crisis point. In School G, the Principal (P1) also indicated that the SENCO leads a collaborative process in gathering information to make a referral to outside agencies. The SENCO ensures that the relevant people are involved in this process. P1 (Principal) commented,

‘So let's say through NEPS, she might bring that to the class teacher who's going to obviously be able to be the best place person to fill in the questionnaire, fill in the form or whatever. So she will bring the paperwork towards other people if they're the better place people to fill it in.’

(P1, Principal)

6.1.4 SENCOs are leading SEN and school-wide initiatives.

SENCOs have the important role of planning, organising, and coordinating the initiatives and programmes that are occurring throughout schools. The participants in Schools A, B, C, D, F, G, and I indicated that SENCOs coordinated the timetables and assigned SET teachers to work with class teachers and take into account SNA timetables when planning the implementation of initiatives or programmes in all classes in the school. It is interesting to note that the SENCO is working in the centre of the microsystem of the school. In addition, the SENCOs in these schools mentioned above, reviewed and assessed the class programmes and inputted the student data onto the electronic system at the start and end of the programme. These initiatives include all pupils within a class. In School D, the SENCO Principal (SP1) indicated that it is the SENCO's job to lead the initiatives in the school when she said,

'it's the SENCO's job to lead the initiatives and things like that, so they lead the SEN team and it's the SENCO and SEN team's job is identify targets, identify a programme to fulfil those targets, implement the programme, assess the programme. And do it again.'

(SP1, SENCO Principal)

The SENCOs work collaboratively not only with the SET team and class teachers when implementing school-wide initiatives but also with subject coordinators. Planning which initiatives and programmes meet the needs of the school as a whole as well the needs of individuals are considered by the SENCOs. This demonstrate that the SENCOs are fulfilling both a universal and specialist role. I interpret from this that SENCOs are leading inclusive pedagogies and the teaching and learning in curricular subjects, such as Maths and English. Is this pointing to a part of their job being the leaders in pedagogy, in fact, pedagogical leaders? The SENCO (S3) in School C did outline that a reflective and the collaborative process occurs when planning initiatives when she declared,

'I'd meet the Literacy and the Numeracy coordinator separately as well, just to kind of go through how things are improving or disimproving so that we can see if the team teaching or if the small group withdrawals have made an impact.'

(S3, SENCO)

In School G, the Principal outlined that the staff communicated collaboratively using a system called SLACK for direct messaging when organising resources for initiatives and implementing initiatives. P1 explained,

'We have SLACK, which is a way of direct messaging people. So we can be direct messaging or in groups. There are different channels. So we have a SET channel. So all SET teachers are there and they can share resources and say if somebody is looking for something or say if somebody is needed for an initiative, so there is a SET channel, an SNA channel and there is a whole staff channel. It is like a professional WhatsApp.'

(P1, Principal)

S2, the SENCO in School B, also indicated that they report on the initiatives to school leaders and to the whole staff. The SET team in this school shared this information on the school calendar to inform all staff members of what initiative/ programmes were occurring in the school at that time. Regarding this, S2 (SENCO) commented,

'We would all give a report on where we are at on different initiatives that are going on within the school, just to make people aware and we would also share it on the school drive and on the school calendar, just that everyone knows what is going on.'

(S2, SENCO)

The SENCOs and Principals in all the schools indicated that the coordination of any team teaching and in class support is the responsibility of the SENCO. This again alludes to SENCOs leading out inclusive pedagogies and teaching and learning within the school microsystem. S3 (SENCO) noted that the timetables stated what initiatives were taking place, *'we have a lot of team teaching time in our timetables. So that would be where the Literacy lift off and Mata sa Rang, all those would be down.'* The Principal (P3) in School C indicated that the SENCO led the initiatives and the organisation and coordination of the SET team in implementing these initiatives. P3 referred to this when he said,

'The SENCO will lead that and she would coordinate that, we're having meetings, might be lift off for instance, setting up the lift off for next term, the SEN team would be called in. They look at where they are going to what class they are going to support if they have one or two sessions and so on. So yeah I would sit in that but the SENCO would organise that'

(P3, Principal)

The data also indicated that S2 (SENCO) and S3 (SENCO) were bringing in social and emotional programmes and initiatives relating to wellbeing into their schools. This is reflective of the new programmes that are being promoted by the Department of Education (which operate within the exosystem). The data suggest that the SENCOs role is impacted at the microsystem level as they need to seek buy in or influence staff on the effectiveness of such programmes. S3 (SENCO) illustrated this when she said,

'I lead the new wellbeing initiatives; I've researched and brought them in like the walk on Friday. I was on the one that suggested it and arranged it and talked to staff and parents organising'

(S3, SENCO)

Finally, in School B, the SENCO is responsible for delivering various initiatives to support additional needs in the classroom. This is an example of the SENCO leading the planning and implementation of specific initiatives that match the needs of the pupils in the school. S2 (SENCO) recounted that,

'If there was a lot of children with anxiety within a classroom, maybe we might look at something like a programme like the anxiety gremlin to work with the whole class and to train teachers in that. Or maybe in the friends programme again, if there was a need for that.'

(S2, SENCO)

SENCOs are therefore knowledgeable in the various initiatives that span the continuum of support which encompass academic, social, emotional and behavioural supports. SENCOs are knowledgeable of the areas of need in the school and then ensure that staff have the opportunities to develop their professional learning in these areas of need.

6.1.5 SENCOs are leading staff development and professional learning within the area of SEN

It was clear from all participants that the SENCOs were leading and committed to the sharing of knowledge of best practice in SEN. The SENCOs are *'leading them (staff) with regard to in service and best practise'* (SP3, SENCO Principal). All SENCOs highlighted that this dissemination role was a central focus of their responsibilities and that they were responsible for leading and co-ordinating knowledge relating to

changes within the practice in schools. Could it be that SENCOs are acting as change agents due to implementing policy changes within schools? SENCOs are involved in the interpretation of circulars and new research and the subsequent distilling of this information to the SET team and staff. All the Principals indicated that the SENCOs are *'leading the staff on what is the best practice ways forward, whether it's definitely in line with circulars or advice papers'* (P2, Principal). P3 (Principal) noted that this involves *'passing on that best practice to the SEN team and ultimately to the class teachers'*. This is suggestive of a cascading of information and knowledge of school-wide practices. In School G, the Principal (P1) also commented that the SENCO is responsible for ensuring,

'that we are up to date on what it is we need to know and putting into practice. So it takes somebody to coordinate and lead that. So it would be, I suppose interpreting the circulars and interpreting the new research on things and being the person who is the gatekeeper sometimes at that kind of load and knowledge and distilling it down to manage what goes to the SET for the most important things for our school and discussing, consulting and making sure that there is, you know, genuine buy in.'

(P1, Principal)

It could be interpreted from this quote that SENCOs are decision makers, interpreters and influencers of what is happening in classrooms, which is a significant undertaking without clear guidelines or formal recognition for this responsibility.

It was apparent that also a key responsibility of the SENCO role is identifying the training and learning needs of staff to support them in implementing best practice. Specifically, P3 (Principal) stated,

'The most important role of the SENCO is supporting teachers and Principal in their role, support each other and to identify, you know what training and what upskilling and what support they need to do their job as best they can.'

(P3, Principal)

Principal (P2) also echoed this role of the SENCO when he noted that they led the staff in professional development which is important to ensure compliance and the implementation of best practice. The word *'compliant'* in the following quote suggests that the SENCO is ensuring that the school is meeting objectives that are set outside the microsystem. P2 declared,

'Having the where with all and the knowledge to upskill and have the best practise, and bringing that back to the staff. Leading the staff on what is the

best practise ways forward, whether it's definitely in line with circulars or advice papers. To make sure that we are compliant in SEN.'

(P2, Principal)

In School B, the SENCO identified that she had led the implementation of new best practice initiatives in the area of social and emotional development and that this involved significant training for all the staff on this new approach. This SENCO (S2) noted that this entailed *'leading these initiatives, providing CPD for teachers and for different programmes and supporting them in different ways'*. In School G, the Principal (P1) commented that the SENCO will *'identify the kind of needs and we'll set up the CPD, whether it's part of Croke Park hour or part of a staff meeting'*. This is a clear example of the SENCO aligning the professional learning to the needs of the whole-school staff. This Principal (P1) also noted that, *'the board is extremely happy to pay for all, if not part of any CPD'*. Three SENCOs (S1, S2, and S3) outlined that they coordinated the training related to targeted programmes and initiatives that were being implemented within their schools. In School B, the SENCO (S2) noted that they were *'working with the Talk Boost programme for an SLT programme for infants and the Building Bridges for comprehension'* and that she was *'delivering the CPD to the teachers'* and was involved in *'co-ordinating and implementing it throughout the school'*.

There are systems in place in the participating schools for staff to disseminate and share knowledge and insights from SEN professional learning courses to both the SET team and the whole staff. P2 (Principal) stated, *'this can happen at a staff meeting, it can happen as a Croke Park session'*. In this school, the Principal noted that the SENCO developed a drop-in system before school whereby staff share this knowledge and best practice insights. P2 (Principal) followed on to state,

'...it's a model that we are looking at where people can actually drop in before school for a workshop on a specific area, short and sweet and 15 minutes on something. It worked last year.'

(P2, Principal)

In addition, S3 (SENCO) referred to a similar system of knowledge sharing in their school. This SENCO insisted,

'Yeah, that's always part of a staff meeting, there would always be SEN as part of a staff meeting. So if we, if any of us had done courses, we'd feedback or if any SETs went to a course, we'd make sure at the next SEN meeting that they

had 15 minutes or so to kind of feedback on the course that they had completed. That's all, it's just built in.'

(S3, SENCO)

In School D, the SENCO Principal (SP1) indicated that there is always a SEN part on the agenda of the staff meetings and that this time is often used to share new developments in SEN research or '*circulars from the department*', or information on '*best practice*' in SEN. This SENCO Principal also commented that the time in meetings is used to reflect, '*look this is out there, this is what they're saying, let's see what's good about it and let's see what we should stop*'.

In School H, the Principal (P2) indicated that the SENCO having attended CPD will then meet with the SET team to share '*good practice*' and guide them on these practices in order to advance their skillset and responsibilities. Regarding this, P2 (Principal) commented,

'upskilling, definitely bringing the SET team along together as a team, sharing good practise, attending CPD and bringing that back to the team. And also upskilling the SET team on paperwork whether it is to do with assistive technology, trying to delegate a little bit further down the line so that they can actually help, so that they would be starting the process of doing the assistive technology, showing them how to do, guiding them, overseeing it, and then bringing it to me.'

(P2, Principal)

To assist with the professional learning of the SET team and the staff, in School D and G, the SENCOs sought out and organised external agencies, such as the NCSE and NEPS, to come into the schools to deliver professional learning that meets the identified needs of the whole-school staff. The SENCOs in School D and G were instrumental in ensuring that professional learning was provided for the staff in relation to changes within practice in the schools, such as setting up a new special class. P1 (Principal) said that the SENCO seeks support and reaches out '*to the likes of the NCSE and having them come in and going to do CPD with us as we did with the new ASD class*'. In School D, SP1 (SENCO Principal) '*got the NEPS person to come down and do a whole staff seminar on differentiation and how that may look in different guises*' to support pupils with additional needs within the classroom setting. That was facilitated and organised by the SENCO, to promote best practice in developing classroom support plans.

The data indicates that the SENCOs are leading the professional learning of new staff in the area of SEN as previously mentioned. The practice of the rotation of staff, which includes SEN staff, as documented in the school policy, was noted by all the SENCOs as challenging. This was due to the need to continuously upskill staff with minimal experience and knowledge in SEN. S1 (SENCO) highlighted this issue when she commented, *'I don't know how many new SETs I'm going to have or whether people will be well experienced'*. In addition, S3 (SENCO) remarked,

'And especially I think this year just has been particularly busy because we had two SETs to Christmas and then they left and then we have two new ones again. So there's been a lot of kind of rehashing and upheaval.'

(S3, SENCO)

S3 followed this up by outlining how she supports and provides professional learning and guidance to these new SETs. She commented, *'I would check in a lot...to make sure that they know how to do the weekly plans, how to do or what assessments they are using or how they are getting on with their team teaching'*. In School G, the Principal (P1) indicated that the SENCO provides professional learning to all school staff, *'especially for newer members of staff'* on the changes in practice, circulars, the continuum of support and *'how resources are allocated and the new model'*. The Principal indicated that the SENCO would be adopting this approach *'on a yearly basis'* to ensure that all staff, especially the new staff, are provided with professional learning on these new developments. I sense from the data that the SENCOs are responsible for continually relaying key information on new and best practice, as they are the gatekeepers of knowledge in the microsystem.

All of the participants interviewed discussed that making staff aware of professional learning in SEN was as a key aspect of the SENCO's role. S3 (SENCO) commented, *'there is a lot of support out there if you actually go searching for them, but they are not advertised enough'*. This highlights the important role that the SENCOs have in raising whole-school staff awareness of professional learning opportunities in SEN. Principal (P2) referred to the importance of sending information on *'CPD courses'* to *'the whole team, the whole staff, or whole teacher because it is not limited to the SEN team'*. In School C, S3 (SENCO) talked about checking the Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI) website on a weekly basis *'to see if there was anything new coming up and send it on to the relevant people in the school'* so

that *'they had an opportunity to avail of CPD'*. The participants talked about using various means of school-wide systems for communicating to staff, such as WhatsApp groups and emails in relation to these professional learning opportunities. SP2 (SENCO Principal) noted when he *'comes across new programmes, new innovations coming in, new techniques being used, new programmes being used'* he sends this information to the SETs through their WhatsApp group or email. In School C, the SENCO (S3) in relation to this commented,

'There is some great CPD in SEN if you go look for it, but it's just making sure that people know it is there and to actually look for it, because if I see any nice ones now, I'd always put it in the staff WhatsApp group or I'd send it to particular teachers.'

(S3, SENCO)

SP3 (SENCO Principal) commented on how she would *'be looking out for courses that the teachers could do'* and they would subsequently *'bring it back and discuss it in our group (SEN team)'*.

In summary, the SENCOs are leading and managing the SEN provision in schools in a collaborative manner, at every level of the Continuum of Support within the microsystem of the school. The SENCOs are leading whole-school approaches to collaboration and building school-wide systems for devising and implementing SEN policy, leading the SET team and all staff in the coordination of SEN provision, identifying pupils and coordinating supports and initiatives for identified needs, and identifying and leading the professional learning in the area of supporting additional needs within the school. Despite the SENCO role not being formalised, it strikes me that the role is enormous and that the SENCO is indeed at the heart of the bio-ecological system. A summary of the key aspects that the SENCOs are leading in the role is presented in Figure 6.6. This theme cannot stand in isolation as the following section outlines findings related to existing attributes of the SENCOs that facilitate the SENCO in leading and managing these school-wide collaborative approaches to SEN. It also depicts the findings that enable the SENCOs in fulfilling their role.

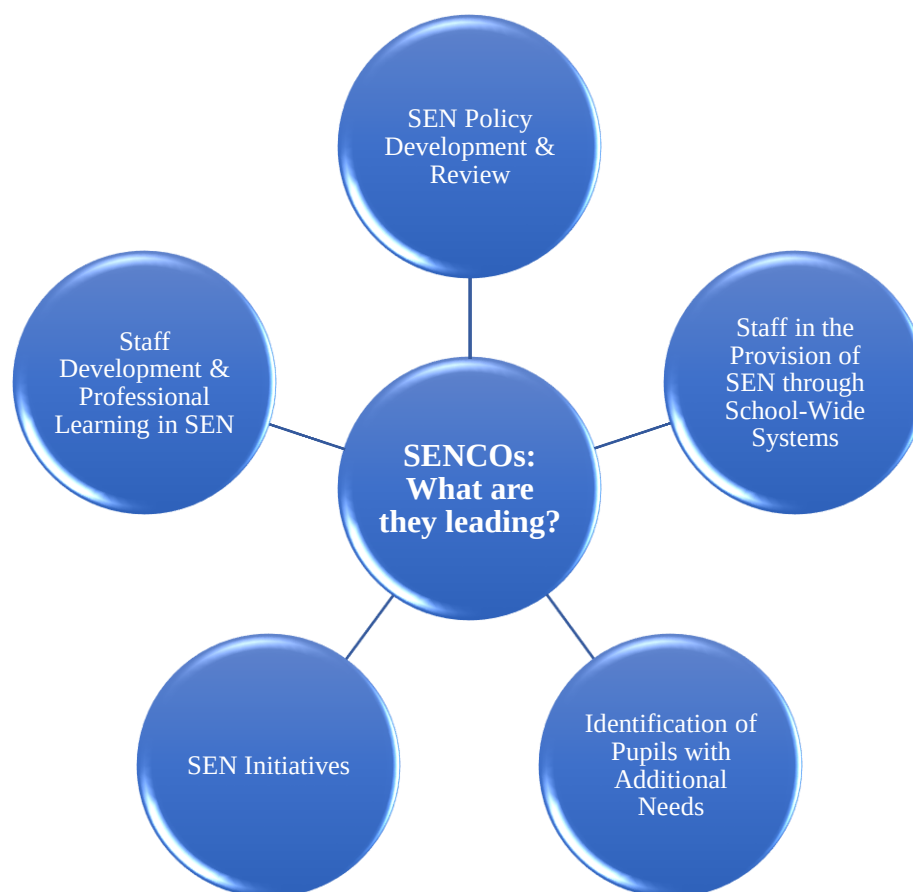


Figure 6.6: Summary of the key aspects that SENCOs are leading in the role.

6.2 Theme Two: Knowledgeable, connected and experienced SENCOs are enabled by supportive staff and principals and a culture of collaboration.

This section relates to the factors that enabled the SENCOs to fulfil their role. The SENCOs held attributes that demonstrated that they were highly knowledgeable (due to professional learning and communities of practice), connected by learning from others within and beyond the microsystem of the school and experienced (through many years of teaching). The data highlight that support and collaboration with staff and the Principals together with a culture of collaboration facilitated them in their role. Two sub-themes emerged from the data and these are outlined in Figure 6.7.

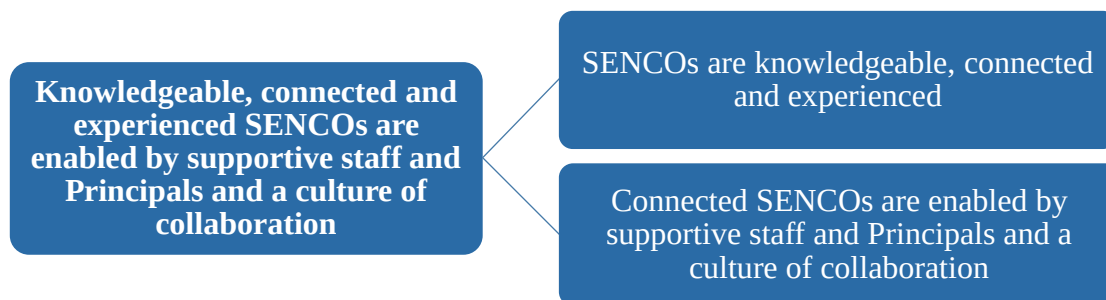


Figure 6.7: Theme Two and related sub-themes.

The findings presented in this second theme set out to answer the following research question:

- What are the perceived enablers to enactment of the SENCO role?

6.2.1 SENCOs are knowledgeable, connected and experienced

SENCOs are knowledgeable and connected

All participants conveyed that the SENCOs were knowledgeable and were thus seen as the *‘specialist and Guru’* and the *‘go to person’* (P2, Principal). S1 (SENCO) indicated that her knowledge means that she is the person to support and offer advice to staff when she noted,

‘I mean at any given time somebody can just pop their head in the door to say, listen, can I just ask you? Or I have a question, or would you mind if I had a look at, or what would I do about...? And that's just constant all the time.’

(S1, SENCO)

Of the six interviewed SENCOs, five of them had postgraduate qualifications. These included postgraduate diplomas (S1, SP1), master’s degrees (S2, SP2 and SP3) and a PhD in *‘the teaching principal in Band 1 DEIS schools strengths, challenges and leadership’* (SP3, SENCO Principal). Of these qualifications, three were specifically related to SEN. S1 had a postgraduate diploma in SEN, SP1 had a postgraduate diploma in Autism and SP3 had a Master’s degree in SEN. S1 (SENCO)

explained how the postgraduate diploma developed her knowledge and confidence to enable her to do the role. S1 (SENCO) recounted,

'I think definitely having done the, the post-grad diploma, um, 15 years ago... I kind of felt I had a very good overall knowledge of what was expected and what was needed before I started the role.'

(S1, SENCO)

SP3 (SENCO Principal) reiterated the value of knowledge which is gained from postgraduate courses in SEN and the how this has benefited the school. This type of learning is developed in the mesosystem. Regarding this SP3 remarked,

'Well, with regard to professional learning, the best thing we ever did here was actually on the advice from the previous SENCO. She went off and she did the [HEI] course the SEN course, the diploma in [HEI] and that really upped our game, you know, because she came back with best practise and I think everybody should do it.'

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

It was apparent from all participants that SENCOs not only gained knowledge and developed their professional learning from academic courses but also from being connected and learning from others. Five of the six SENCOs (S1, S2, S3, SP1 and SP3) outlined that they were continuously learning from each other through working collaboratively with all school staff. In School B, the SENCO (S2) talked about how the staff meetings facilitate a means to share information and best practice so that all staff learn from each other in a connected manner. Specifically, S2 conveyed,

'I suppose, sharing information with staff at staff meetings and sharing different things that work in different classrooms and also in the, amongst the SET teachers, that it really helps in just developing that awareness and just sharing ideas and sharing what works for different people.'

(S2, SENCO)

SENCOs are also connected to other school staff and learn from each other through the collaborative approaches to SEN Provision. P3 (Principal) when making reference to his staff noted, *'I think that they are learning from each other all the time'*. In School G, the Principal (P1) explained how the co-ordination and implementation of team teaching fosters the sharing of knowledge and best practice when she commented,

‘...but also through team teaching, we have found that that is a great way to share the wealth because you see great things and you share great things. You talk. So that has been a suppose the door into this new way of sharing and working, which is great.’

(P1, Principal)

Importantly, S2 (SENCO) insisted that the best form of professional learning comes from collaborating with colleagues in your school. In the quotation below this SENCO emphasises the value and knowledge that can be gained from engaging in ‘*professional conversations*’ with staff in the school, as follows:

‘Yeah, absolutely. And I think sometimes we get the best form of CPD from our colleagues, the person next door, the person who pops in for a quick piece of advice from and I think I suppose the biggest challenge is offering opportunities where people can collaborate and can have those professional conversations. And I don't think we have enough time given on the timetable for these collaborations. But I think they're definitely very important. And I like I said, sometimes the best forms of CPD is the people you're working with. The person next door.’

(S2, SENCO)

Learning from each other in the school community (microsystem) to enhance the SENCOs’ knowledge of their responsibilities was also highlighted by SP3 (SENCO Principal) when she referred to collaborating with the retiring SENCO about the role. SP3 explained,

‘And because I learned a huge amount from Teacher XXX, which is the girl that's retired, you know, she cause she really spread the gospel, she really spread the word. So I learned a huge amount from her as regards the SENCO role.’

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

Having connections with other colleagues and professionals outside of the school microsystem was indicated as a key aspect in enhancing the SENCOs’ knowledge and development. Five of the six SENCOs interviewed referred to the fact that they were members of a community of practice. The communities of practice, along with professional learning establishments reside in a thinly populated mesosystem. S3 (SENCO) illustrated how beneficial being connected to others outside of her own school is in supporting her decision-making and knowledge and best practices in SEN provision. S3 stated,

'While the SENCO Forum is brilliant, and the WhatsApp group...it's just brilliant getting the responses and getting kind of help from others or even that, like the Facebook groups and different things, and the NCSE the advisors there are brilliant. Like they're so good for helping and our NEPS psychologists like if I e-mail her, she is great to get back with ideas. And the ILSA conferences just brilliant.'

(S3, SENCO)

The value of the SEN communities of practice was further highlighted by S3 when she declared,

'there's always people to ask for help, which is great especially with the SEN community of practice like it's brilliant to have other people in the same role that you can bounce ideas off or ask questions to...I find that group invaluable.'

(S3, SENCO)

In an area where no SENCO community of practice existed, S2 (SENCO) reached out to neighbouring schools to set up their own support and learning groups. Specifically, this SENCO noted *'we are also developing a support network just in the town and we are working with the other two schools with the SENCOs there'*. S2 followed on to state, *'we are connecting with the others...to set up that community of practice to share practice'*.

In School H, the Principal (P2) talked about the value of knowledge gained by the SENCO from an email based community of practice that she was connected to, for the school as a whole. Regarding this, P2 explained,

'Yeah, and e-mail group. So she (SENCO) has struck a good relationship there. So we access that as a team as a group. We say can you check this with the group or they might have an idea of something like that so.'

(P2, Principal)

S1 (SENCO) as a facilitator of a SET support group noted numerous benefits related to gaining knowledge by being connected in this SEN community of practice. These benefits were outlined by S1 as follows:

'I was asked would I take over a SET group (community of practice) as a facilitator for the meetings. So I do that as well. We, we meet just once a month and sometimes it might only be a handful of people, but, I think it's just good to, to keep in touch with others and to see what's going on. Like schools are so different and the way, even though we're all working from the one continuum of support, it looks like different things in different schools. And I think, you know, kinda liaising with other SETs is really important to know how others

are doing it. And if you have a problem, well, maybe they have a solution or maybe they have a suggestion.'

(S1, SENCO)

I interpreted from this quote that the interactions within the various SENCOs' microsystems differ and that by being connected to each other through communities of practice and professional learning institutions, SENCOs are able to learn from each other and gain relevant knowledge for their own microsystem.

The benefits and value of communities of practice were also reiterated by P3 (Principal), who noted, *'I think forums are important now and they are certainly the way to go, where you are putting all the information altogether and everyone is learning from each other'*. Communities of practice allowed SENCOs the opportunity to connect with other SENCOs in order to learn from each other, support each other and discuss and reflect on best practices. This observation was clearly articulated by S3 (SENCO) when she said the following about her experience of communities of practice:

'Well, like the outside speakers are brilliant first of all, but it's even chatting to each other and bouncing ideas off each other or asking for advice from each other because we're all in the same boat. We all have the same kind of role, the same challenges. So it can get overwhelming at times when there's so much going on, so I think it's great to have others in a similar position to actually bounce off or reflect on after it's gone okay well, actually, I wonder if I did that. It's great for ideas and for reflection for yourself.'

(S3, SENCO)

SP3 (SENCO Principal) highlighted how valuable these communities of practice were and indicated that the SENCO group she is involved in *'is absolutely spectacular'*. She further explained,

'I am in a WhatsApp with them (SENCO Forum). So if you have a question you can send it into the WhatsApp group and somebody will come back you know with maybe what they're doing in their school which is fantastic.'

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

SP3 explained that the SENCO Forum is *'invaluable'* in supporting her and the group as they can identify the areas or programmes that they would like support in. This approach ensures that the community of practice provides professional

learning and support for the SENCOs that is specific to their needs. In relation to this, SP3 commented,

'I suppose in our group like it's what we want. So like it's run by a teacher...it's not imposed on us. So it's a nice way to work. It's informal, so it's if we say, you know, I don't know anything about this, is there anyway you could get somebody in to speak about this. And then, you know, we'll try and get somebody in to talk on this area. So I suppose it's coming from the group, it's intrinsic, so I think that that's very, very good.'

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

SENCOs are experienced

It is clear from the data that the knowledgeable SENCOs in the participating schools are extremely experienced in teaching and specifically in the area of SEN. This experience has given the SENCOs the capability, credibility, and respect to fulfil their role in a connected, collaborative and efficient manner with the school community (microsystem). The SENCOs' experience has resulted in them being viewed as *'the specialist'* in the area of SEN (P2, Principal). P2 also articulated clearly that, *'the SENCO due to her experience and capability and she's so respected within the school, that staff see her as the lead in SEN'* and followed up by commenting, *'this experience the person (SENCO) has means they're the go to person'*.

The six SENCOs who were interviewed had experience in mainstream teaching, teaching as a SET and also as a SENCO. The average years teaching experience for the six interviewed SENCOs was 22.8 years and their average years as a SET was 6.7 years. When looking at their experience as a SENCO the average years working in this position was less at 3.3 years. This could be reflective of the recent emergence of the SENCO role within the school setting. P1 (Principal) referred to this when she declared, *'I think it's a relatively new role and we're now calling them SENCOs'*. All of the interviewed SENCOs had a post of responsibility related to the SENCO role, including Principal, AP1 or AP2. The specific detail on this together with the teaching experience of the participants is detailed in Table 4.2 (Chapter Four). In addition, the three non-SENCO Principals indicated that the SENCOs in their schools had similar post of responsibilities, namely Deputy Principal, AP1 and AP2. The SENCO in School H had 14 years' experience in SEN and in School I the SENCO had 7 years SEN experience.

Consequently, it is indicative that the SENCOs in the participating schools were highly experienced in teaching, in SEN, as a SENCO and as leaders through their post of responsibilities. All of this experience contributed to their influence and connectedness within the school microsystem. In School H, P2 (Principal) illustrated how the lived experience of the SENCO had a direct influence on the leadership of SEN practices and decisions made in the school. This experience of the SENCO in School H was respected by the Principal to the degree where they trusted their ideas, suggestions and decisions. Regarding this, P2 (Principal) declared,

‘...more times we go with what the suggestion might be from the SENCO. Because I respect it because they are the person in it every single day. So I respect that.’

(P2, Principal)

To elaborate, in School I, the Principal (P3) conveyed that the SENCO, who was also the Deputy Principal, was very in touch and connected with her SEN team and their position due to her prior SEN experience. In relation to this P3 (Principal) remarked,

‘The SENCO...is very, very supportive to the teachers and very aware because she was a SET herself. So she has a lot of experience herself, and that experience exudes.’

(P3, Principal)

This Principal further highlighted the importance of experience and the continuity of experience within the SET team in the school. This was illustrated when P3 recounted,

‘In our school I have found and I learned that going forward it’s important that you have experience on your staff SEN and that there was a habit within schools, I’m going back 10/15 years ago, there was a habit that new staff coming in would go into SEN.’

(P3, Principal)

In addition, P3 insisted that *‘but I think as a whole, I think you need experienced teachers in that role (SET)’*. It is alluded to here that experience is essential within the SET team and thus an experienced SENCO is imperative to lead and deliver the SEN provision using collaborative approaches that connect them with others throughout the school microsystem. Indeed P3 stated, *‘the SENCO would have a lot of experience of SEN teaching as a SEN teacher and then she brings that to the*

table'. In addition, SP3 (SENCO Principal) conveyed the significance of experience for the SENCO role. SP3 outlined that in her school there was nobody deemed suitable or experienced enough for the role and thus she took up the role as well as fulfilling her Principal duties. Specifically, SP3 explained that,

'So then there was nobody strong enough in my SET teachers to take on the SENCO role, or nobody really had a post, so, I ended up taking it on and it's a big role and it's a big one to kind of keep my hands on, you know, to make sure things are all right. I prefer if I had a teacher in there as a SENCO. I think it would work better, but it's the way it is at the moment until I see can I put somebody in there.'

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

All three SENCO Principals (SP1, SP2, and SP3) indicated that they undertook the role as they felt that there was no staff member capable to take on the role. Interestingly these SENCO Principals were in the smaller schools. It could be inferred that having a smaller school size resulted in a smaller staff pool to choose from for the SENCO role. However, these SENCO Principals also alluded that by undertaking the SENCO role themselves decision-making processes were more efficient, although they did emphasise that the associated workload was high.

6.2.2 Connected SENCOs are enabled by supportive staff and supportive Principals, and a culture of collaboration

The prevalence of the term 'collaboration' with 'SENCO' in the citations is evident in the word cloud below (Figure 6.8) and a further justification for the SENCO to be at the centre of the Bronfenbrenner's bioecological system. A search was done in NVivo12 for both these terms and a subsequent word cloud was produced which showed how the terms 'collaboration' and 'SENCO' are prevalent together with terms such as 'professional learning', 'effectively', 'colleagues' and 'support'.

'I suppose in my first year I got a lot of support because the rest of the teachers would have been there a while longer but I did get a lot of support from them. And I definitely feel more confident this year.'

(S2, SENCO)

In School E, the SENCO Principal (SP2) talked about how the staff supported him by taking responsibility for aspects of the SENCO role. This was helpful and necessary for this SENCO Principal due to his extensive workload from being both the SENCO and the Principal. SP2 recounted,

'I went to one specific teacher who has done the post grad in SET and who has worked in SET for years. I asked them to assist with the role, so that was a big ask because it is a big area so they do dedicate some amount of time but there's only so much time they can dedicate towards it, so they have been a huge help to me.'

(SP2, SENCO Principal)

It was apparent that the SEN meetings provided an opportunity for the staff to support the SENCO in their role. S2 (SENCO) indicated *'there is a lot of collaboration on the Friday meeting (SEN), helping each other as well with different things'*. In School C, the SENCO (S3) indicated that these meetings were *'brilliant for kind of getting us together'* and she referred to using these meetings to *'problem solve together as a group'* which *'make things that bit easier because then I know I need to bring this in or I need to talk to them about that'*. S3 (SENCO) indicated when she spoke about colleagues supporting each other, she commented that trust, good working relationships and collegiality were important. This facilitated a willingness to share, and *'discuss what they're doing and how they are doing this'* (P3, Principal). P3 reiterated, *'Good collegiality' is 'down to relations between teacher and teacher (including SENCO) and where that trust and relationship is good and people trust the other people, people are willing to share'*.

In School C, the SENCO (S3) noted that staff support her in her role and that she values this as it *'is great to get their ideas and have people give you ideas and it does make things that bit easier and clear on what you are actually doing'*. The data suggest here that the support from staff through the collaborative sharing of ideas helped the SENCO to drive and implement the tasks associated with their role.

The staff also support the SENCOs by sharing best practice from professional learning with them in order to improve the provision with the school settings. In School F, the SENCO Principal (SP3) commented,

‘Also some of my teachers would go to the ILSA conference now. I haven't gone yet but like that we would bring back if there's anything worthwhile, they bring it back and we might have an hour on a Friday afternoon and they talk us through what they've learned.’

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

Principal (P1) referred to the importance of a connected SENCO working with supportive individuals in the school microsystem to facilitate impactful collaborative approaches and interactions for the provision of SEN that lead to *‘best outcomes’*. Elaborating on this, P1 said,

‘I think with any working arrangement, a collaborative work is better than single work and you know it isn't just the voice of one and their opinions as to how things should be done. In schools, the class teachers know their pupil's best and collaboration will lead to much better outcomes for the children and for the staff working with them. So it must be a part of every interaction, whether it's teacher, mainstream teachers, SET teachers, SENCO and SET, SENCO and classroom teacher and Principal, if there's no, if there isn't collaboration there, you don't have a joined up picture and therefore it can't lead to the best outcomes. So it's hugely important.’

(P1, Principal)

Connected SENCOs are enabled by supportive Principals

All three Principals (P1, P2, P3) interviewed supported the SENCOs in their role through various means, such as reducing tasks and workload, sharing decision-making (co-leadership), and facilitating opportunities for professional learning. When referring to the SENCO in School G, P1 (Principal) declared that *‘we’ve a very close relationship’* and that *‘we would be very much tied in with each other about things’*. P1 followed on by emphasising that her supportive working relationship with her SENCO involves trust and a genuine interest and appreciation of the SENCO, her capabilities and her role. Regarding this P1 conveyed,

‘I am appreciative of what she does and will hear her when it comes to her concerns. I trust her implicitly and acknowledge the work that she does. And so I've gotta give...I would keep informed with her and she knows that I'm a

sounding board and that I genuinely want to know. I'm interested to know how things are.'

(P1, Principal)

The three Principals were appreciative of the enormity of the SENCO role and were motivated to support the SENCOs through reducing their workload by sharing tasks where possible and appropriate. P1 commented on the extent of the SENCOs workload when she noted, *'I think she (SENCO) covers a huge amount, it's massive, a massive role'*. Similarly, P2 acknowledged this when he said, *'it's a massive job, I don't know how she does it, it is like a military campaign'*. This Principal followed up on this by saying, *'so I try to help out as best I can...so I see I have a duty of care to my SENCO to make sure that they are supported in the best way possible'*. P2 then emphasised that he supports the SENCO by taking *'on some of the jobs that you feel that you can actually assist with'*. In addition, P2 indicated, *'I help her (SENCO) out'* and *'share the load'* with tasks that match his skill set, such as in ICT. P2 elaborated by saying,

'I would look after the standardised testing online and I look after the CAT4 and updating of the databases and setting it up there because I feel that's something I like to do. I have the skill set and I can actually help out in that role'.

(P2, Principal)

This approach by Principals to reduce the SENCOs workload was also evident in School A when the SENCO (S1) explained that the Principal *'splits the duties'* to support the work of the SENCO. It is interesting to think that a reason that posts of responsibility were created was to assist the Principal with their workload but yet the Principal is relieving the SENCO of some of their extensive SENCO workload. It was apparent that the Principals sought to work in a co-leadership manner with the SENCO to support them in fulfilling their role. In School H, the Principal (P2) noted that teamwork was essential to cover all tasks and responsibilities as opposed to overloading the SENCO. This was indicated when he declared,

'It's also being careful in not throwing things onto the SENCO...it's trying to approach it as a team. So it's not just one person's duty. We don't use that language. We kind of use working together or doing this together'.

(P2, Principal)

P3 also echoed this and noted that the SENCO and himself *'work together and*

come together as a group'. In addition, the Principals support the SENCOs through a co-leadership approach as noted by P1 when she said,

'...it's not seen as that's your job and this is mine. It has to be Co leadership and as much as a deputy principal and a principal will co-lead, I think within the area of special needs and whether it's a promoted post or not, I think Co-leadership has to happen there. It's not just delegated over and you deal with that, it can't be to work well.'

(P1, Principal)

This co-leadership involves shared decision-making and P2 illustrated the importance of the SENCO's opinions and suggestions when making decisions on the provision of SEN in the school as follows:

'...in consultation with myself, but if they have an idea where we should be going we discuss it, and we'll arrange a meeting and we discuss it. I hear it out and we just give the go ahead and go with it...'

(P2, Principal)

P2 also outlined that the SENCO discusses and makes decisions together on various areas in leading the provision in the school. He added that it involved,

'looking at personnel say like matching an SNA with a class level or SET. Just trying to iron those things out. Could be a timetabling issue, It could be a physical building, who works from where, it's just where we need to get our opinions out on the table. We just need to discuss it.'

(P2, Principal)

This co-leadership approach involved both the SENCO and Principal working alongside each other when meeting with staff to co-ordinate provision. Elaborating on this, P3 said,

'We co-manage that...I would do it or the SENCO would do it, we talk about and ultimately the SENCO would do that...But I would always like to be there as a mark of respect because it can be a fine line. Probably. I think it's important that the both of us meet staff and meet SNAs, but on a day-to-day basis the SENCO would be dealing with SNAs.'

(P3, Principal)

P3 also indicated that he would support the SENCO by working closely with the SENCO when dealing with any issues or difficulties that may arise. Specifically, P3 declared,

'Sometimes we would sit down with a SEN teacher and maybe there are particular difficulties and we discuss and say OK how do we get around this'

or what do we do. So we put our heads together and we discussed that, so that happens ongoing, it could be five times a week it could be once a week. You know, but it's ongoing and the facility is there. I say open door policy it has to be because it's ever changing.'

(P3, Principal)

In School C, the SENCO (S3) illustrated how her Principal supported her decision-making within her SENCO role. She noted that when prioritising needs for the following year *'the Principal and myself would sit down and go through that'*. The SENCO also elaborated that if she was *'unclear on who to prioritise for NEPS'* she would bring that to the Principal alongside any *'huge changes in timetables...and huge behavioural issues'* in order to gain support in her decision-making.

The data also suggested that the Principals supported the SENCOs by facilitating opportunities for professional learning. This involved the Principals funding the SENCOs attendance at courses and conferences and releasing the SENCO from school. Regarding this, S3 (SENCO) declared,

'if there is a course and it is during school time, but it's very applicable to someone, he (Principal) will release some teachers to avail of the training...we have been able to attend the ILSA conference, being able to do different things. I've done the TEACCH in Cork.'

(S3, SENCO)

P2 (Principal) also alluded to this support and explained that if the SENCO, *'wants to have access to CPD or anything like that the school will fully fund it. Expenses, if there any expenses, they are paid in a timely way.'*

Finally, the support that the Principals showed for the SENCOs was clearly indicated in the many complimentary remarks that they made about them throughout all the interviews. This support was an overriding thread throughout the data. For example, this is indicated in the following quotations:

'She is brilliant...I would be lost without her.'

(P1, Principal)

'We have a remarkable efficient and brilliant SENCO, you know. Really, really excellent.'

(P2, Principal)

'We try and share the load and she's super person in that she does so much work.'

(P2, Principal)

'We have an extremely strong SENCO in our school.'

(P2, Principal)

Connected SENCOs are enabled by a culture of collaboration

In all schools, it emerged that there was a culture of collaboration and this was consistent throughout the data in both phases of the research. This culture enabled the SENCOs to carry out their role in a collaborative manner. P3 indicated '*collaborative practices*' take place and staff come together to discuss provision and stated, '*we would sit down myself and the SENCO...and we would structure that*'. In all of the schools, it was apparent that the culture enabled staff to work together in order to provide the most appropriate and effective provision for pupils with additional needs and all pupils within the schools. This culture of collaboration is more evident in recent times, as noted by P3, and these changes in culture are being facilitated through the SENCO's leadership of SEN provision. P3 in relation to this, asserted,

'It's everybody. It's everybody. I think everybody has to be involved. It has to be a whole-school initiative, I think for everybody to buy in. I suppose traditionally going back over the years and Irish schools, perhaps in a lot of schools it was kind of the job of the SET teacher to take the child out, withdraw work with that child, bring them back in. The collaboration mightn't have been as strong as it should have been. I would think now teachers are more aware as a team how the pupils are performing and where the difficulties and inadequacies are in the system. So I think that now it's a lot more of a team approach. You know it's not individual anymore, it's more team approach and whole-school approach which I think is a lot better for the children, particularly because as they pass on, everyone's aware of where the difficulties are.'

(P3, Principal)

In many of the schools, collaborative meetings were arranged to plan for the provision of SEN and the planning of the implementation of initiatives and interventions in classes. This collaboration from all staff clearly enabled the SENCO to lead the planning of SEN provision throughout the school in a connected and effective manner. Regarding this, P3 declared, '*every month we would have at least one collaborative meeting of all staff together and in groups*'. S1 (SENCO)

highlighted how staff are willing and motivated to collaborate with each other throughout the school and noted, *'there was a great sense of commitment in the school'* and *'camaraderie'*. In School H, the Principal (P2) reiterated this and he indicated how all staff willingly collaborated with the SENCO to assist them in fulfilling their duties, when he declared,

'We don't say that's your job, do it. So I think that is our culture and ethos here as well, because we all roll up our sleeves because apart from SENCO duties the person is doing a hell of a lot more as well. You know it's just a team player and management team player.'

(P2, Principal)

This culture *'was always encouraged'* by the Principal (P2) and his SENCO and the staff were empowered *'to take new initiatives and to try things out and to work in teams'*. In School A, the SENCO (S1) echoed this culture of collaboration, which enabled the SENCO role, and declared, *'it just seems to be a natural part of the culture of the school...I mean they get together and it's all collaborative'*.

In summary, there was a real sense from the data that the expertise and the knowledge of the SENCOs supported them to build connections in every facet of the microsystem and mesosystem. Connections were built with pupils, parents, teachers, support staff, principals, management teams, professional learning bodies and external agencies, (if available to that school community) due to the existence of a collaborative culture created by supportive Principal and in turn supportive staff. A summary of the key factors that enabled the SENCO to execute the role are displayed in Figure 6.9. Despite the SENCO role being at the centre of the systems where they are leading the whole-school provision for pupils with SEN, the role is not formally recognised and brings with it ambiguity. The next theme presents how the ambiguous nature of the role that is still evolving in a policy vacuum does not support SENCOs in fulfilling this extensive role. They have insufficient time and inadequate support from external professional service to truly advance inclusive special education in schools.

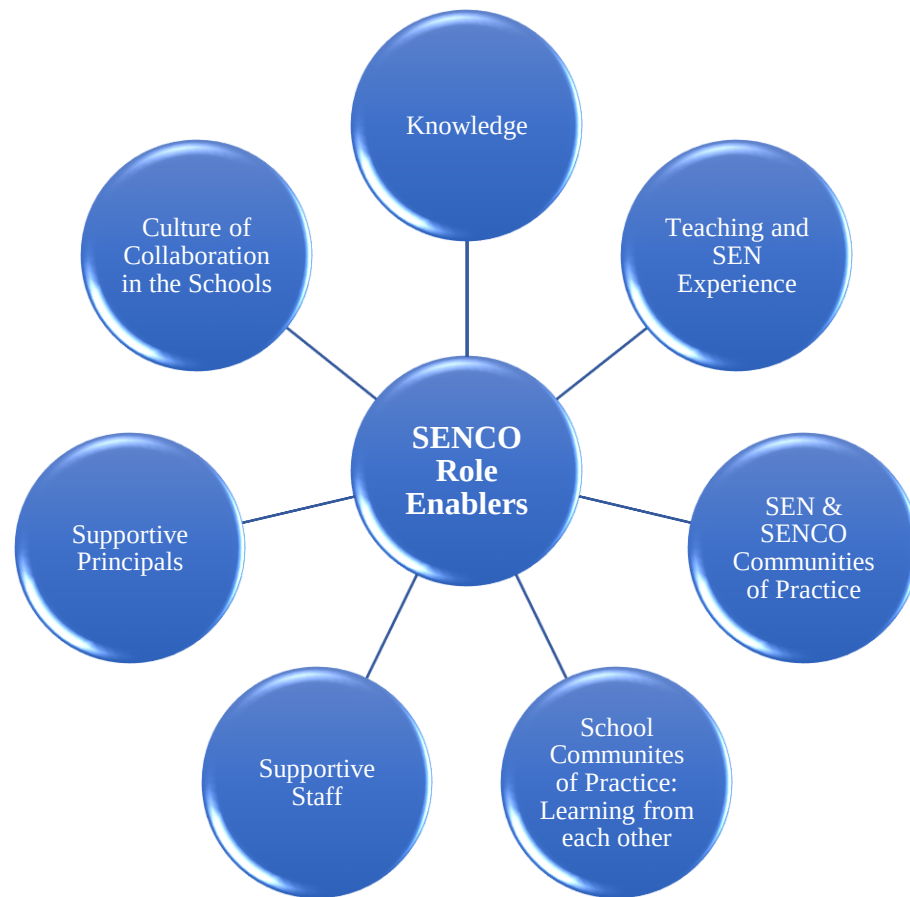


Figure 6.9: Key factors that enabled the SENCO to enact their role.

6.3 Theme Three: The extensive, nebulous nature of the SENCO role has evolved in a policy vacuum with insufficient time and inadequate support from external professional services.

This section relates to the factors that acted as barriers to the SENCOs leadership and management of SEN provision in schools. The role is ever changing and evolving with an increasing workload. Many of the SENCOs were taking work home to do outside of school hours due to the lack of dedicated non-teaching time during the school day. The lack of guidance and policy direction on the role is creating confusion and contributing to the nebulous nature of the role. Inadequate support from external professional services, such as HSE and NEPS, hampers the work of the SENCOs who are trying to support students in need of therapeutic intervention in the absence of these services. The sub-themes for this theme are detailed in Figure 6.10.

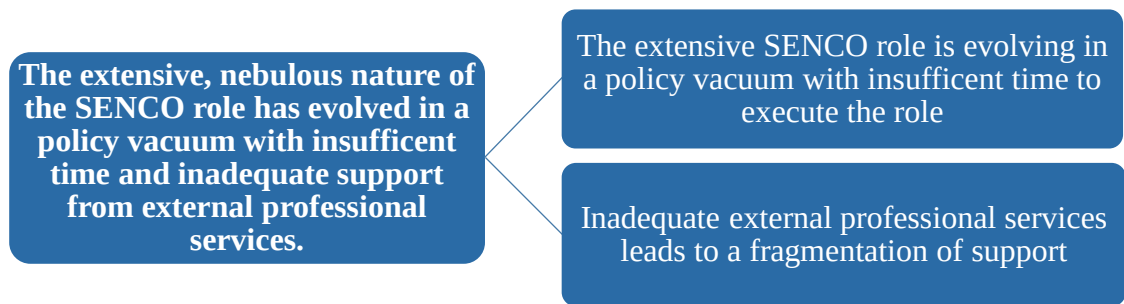


Figure 6.10: Theme Three and related sub-themes.

The findings presented in this third theme set out to answer the following research question:

- What are the perceived barriers to enactment of the SENCO role?

6.3.1 The extensive SENCO role is evolving in a policy vacuum with insufficient time to execute the role

The SENCO role is evolving in a policy vacuum

All participants indicated that the SENCO role is continuously evolving and changing in schools in recent times. S3 (SENCO) remarked, *‘Its changing so much, like the goalposts seemed to be changing every week’*. In School G, P1 (Principal) asserted, *‘I think it’s a relatively new role and we’re now calling them SENCOs’*.

Over recent years, changes in the exosystem due to societal changes have brought about many changes in the mesosystem and microsystem of schools. As leaders in schools grapple with changing policies that have resulted in changing practices which affect all staff, they look to adapt and respond to these changes. SENCOs are leading the SEN provision in schools but are doing so in a policy vacuum. P1 (Principal) commented that SENCOs in general are unsure of what their role is and stated that there is a lack of policy guidance relating to this role. Regarding this she stated,

'There is nothing formal that I can see that outlines the role of SENCO and we could really benefit from that.... just knowing what the role of the SENCO is would be very helpful.'

(P1, Principal)

S1 (SENCO) reiterated the need for guidance on the SENCO role and illustrated that without this she is not confident that she would be compliant if she had an inspection regarding her role and SEN provision in her school. S1 explained,

'What would be great would be if the department recognised the SENCO role...I have great difficulty with the whole SENCO role as, it is not defined. So in my point of view, we need a policy. Like I know we need the documents that show how the Continuum of Support is being used in the school. I know the SETs need to have their plans and the support plans, but there isn't actually anything I can say, if I have a SEN inspection in the morning, tick, tick, tick, tick, I am ready. I have no idea what they are going to look for when they come in'.

(S1, SENCO)

In light of the most recent policy on the provision of SEN, all participants indicated that the guidelines were ambiguous without clear specifications. S3, (SENCO) indicated

'It would be great if there was less ambiguity in the guidelines like oh you are entitled to time for planning or for coordinating, but they (Department of Education) won't specify how long, they won't, you know I think if there is more clear guidance, I think it would be easier'.

(S3, SENCO)

SENCOs are now responsible for supporting staff and developing collaborative practices to enable staff to support all pupils within the microsystem of the school. In recent policy, there was acknowledgement that coordination time between teachers was important in the provision of SEN. In relation to this S1 (SENCO) conveyed,

'Within the learning support guideline, even the more recent 2017 ones they (The Department of Education) do acknowledge that (in the coordination of SEN) coordination and liaison is really important and the time needs to be given to it, but, you know, make it as short as possible. It should not be impacting on the kids.'

(S1, SENCO)

There are many different practices occurring in schools in relation to teachers' coordination and liaison time due to the lack of clarity within policy. S1 (SENCO) illustrated,

'So we have 45 minutes on a Friday, I would say a lot of schools traditionally have the last slot on a Friday. It's a friend of mine, up the country and her inspector, she is a SET and her inspector came in and said, you need full contact time (with pupils) during your school week and to take out that planning time or liaison time and they (inspector) refused to let them have it'.

(S1, SENCO)

In spite of the lack of clarity, changes in practice in schools have brought about new ways of responding to the identification, prioritisation, teaching and support of pupils. In School B, S2 (SENCO), indicated how the SENCOs role has changed and evolved in relation to changes in policy (at the exosystem and extending to the macrosystem) in the identification of pupils that have additional needs in schools in 2017. S2 (SENCO) described, *'I suppose it's not as black and white as it was. You have to and are able to rely more, I suppose, on your own reports, on your testing and on your assessments'.* All schools indicated that the role is constantly changing and that the SENCOs are constantly ensuring that the school policies are reflecting ongoing policy changes. S2 (SENCO) commented, *'we reviewed it this year, yeah, and we added a good bit to it. We added to it more that we took from it'.* P1 (Principal) when commenting on the SEN policy in his school, stated, *'we have again a new policy put together in the last 12 months....it's changing so rapidly, so that will be revised ongoing'.*

In School C, S3 (SENCO) clearly articulated some changes in practices and processes that she is responsible for leading and implementing in the microsystem of the school, as follows:

'There seems to be an awful lot of change, we had just gotten into the new Irish exemptions and then they changed it again. We had just gotten into the summer provision, they've changed it again. Do you know there seems to be an awful lot of change in the role and with the whole SNA thing they were getting the new model, it was coming in, now it's not. So it's kind of, there's a lot of chopping and changing, but in the general day-to-day yes, I would feel confident like I know when I have to administer this, when I have to get that done, what I have to say'.

(S3, SENCO)

It can again, be interpreted from the data that SENCOs are important agents of change or mediators of change. All participants concurred that the SENCO role has continually grown and that it has been getting bigger in recent years. P1 (Principal) remarked, *'It's just expanded in some ways'*. S1 (SENCO) also illustrates that as a B post holder (AP2) that her role is extensive,

'The deputy principal is still dealing with outside agencies and applications for technology because the role has, uh, its grown hugely. And so what the A post holder was doing in her role, as SENCO, I doubled that, um, even without having all the outside agency stuff.'

(S1, SENCO)

Multiple roles of responsibility and the extensive SENCO role

All participants outlined that the SENCO role was extensive and had many parts to it. In School G, P1 (Principal) gave an insight in to the many elements to the role of the SENCO when she illustrated,

'Yeah look like, I mean, you're trying to be a teacher. You're trying to be a leader and of other SET teachers, but also it is the liaison then with class teachers and it is then trying to report I suppose back to the principal and senior leaders in school and that's so it's multiple..... I think she covers a huge amount, it is a massive role....She has a full teaching timetable, except for Friday afternoons. There is an hour where she meets with the SET team and like that because she is a post holder, a lot of the work we do here is after hours'

(P1. Principal)

S1 (SENCO) conveyed that she also has teaching duties and as an AP1 post-holder she also leads a curricular subject alongside her SENCO duties. S1 remarked,

'I have my support plans and I have my short-term plans, and I have my Cuntas Míosúils and all that. So that is, my 10 to nine to 25 to three. But then like the SENCO part of it is, it, it's an awful lot bigger, It's an awful lot bigger than that. That takes more of my time than actually, my planning and my assessment and all of that. And that's the time I don't have, that is nine o'clock tonight when I'm doing up a form for somebody for tomorrow.'

(S1, SENCO)

The SEN-related post of responsibility held by the three SENCOs who were not Principals (S1, S2 and S3) also included the responsibility of a curricular subject (S1 and S2) and the responsibility of a wellbeing plan within the school (S3). S2

(SENCO) noted that as well as being a full time SET that her curriculum subjects were 'English and RSE', and S3 (SENCO) noted that along with being a fulltime SET her AP2 post was 'SENCO and wellbeing because I suppose they link in together very well'. S1 (SENCO), having outlined her responsibilities as a fulltime SET teacher (as above), continued to explain her curricular subject and she also commented that due to her school now becoming DEIS that she is now also responsible for themes within the DEIS action plan. Regarding this S1 (who more recently attained an AP1 post having previously held a AP2 post for the SENCO role) declared,

'It is also part of my A post, like all the post holders in the school, I have a curricular subject as well and maths is my one. There's a new maths curriculum coming down the road and because we are a new DEIS school, we have a new DEIS action plan that we have to get up and running and numeracy is one of the themes. And so as if I didn't have enough on my plate, that's going to be my baby as well.'

(S1, SENCO)

The data from the participating schools suggests that, through the many roles that SENCOs have and within their post of responsibility, they are supporting many facets of the schools' microsystem, while interacting with all the other systems too, extending all the way out to the chronosystem. In school I, P3 (Principal) gave an insight into the numerous duties of their AP1 administrative post-holder who is also the SENCO when he illustrated,

'All supervision in the school is done, morning supervision, yard supervision, afterschool supervision XXX does that. Also involved in compiling the policy, reviewing policy with me that is on-going. All timetabling within the school, PE, Science looking at all different areas. Identifying what's needed for SSE regards policy for SSE going forward, again with the person who's in charge of curriculum development, looking at where PDST as well. Looking at the PLC for the last couple of years, coordinating that with me and looking to see getting PDST people into work with the staff and in-service for the staff in that area and other areas as well.'

(P3, Principal)

In School H, P2 (Principal) commented how extensive the SENCO is, 'the role is enormous and like the fact that things are so tight on time and resources'. P2 (Principal) included an outline of the significance of the SENCO role to his own role as Principal when he declared,

‘And I just don't know how the SENCO does it. I really do not know because if that wasn't being done, it would fall to me. And it's such a critical area. I wouldn't be able to make sure all timetabling and resources would be done. We're very fortunate the person that's doing it is just excellent.’

(P2, Principal)

The SENCO has insufficient time to execute their role

Seven participants out of nine indicated that the SENCOs had insufficient time to complete the SENCO role during school time. P2 (Principal) commented that even though the SENCO in his school is an AP1 post holder, they would not be able to fulfil their SENCO role during school time. Regarding this, P2 stated, *‘there is no way it can be done throughout the school day because she is involved with so many other duties’*. When P2 was asked if the role itself was impacted negatively due to the SENCO having multiple jobs to do, he did clearly articulate that the role itself was not impacted on negatively due to the SENCO completing work in their own personal time. Specifically the Principal commented,

‘I don't think it does because it impacts so much on the person's life. So what I'm saying is the person is such a professional. They do so much work outside the school. So in an ideal world, the person should have release time. They should have time to because not everyone is going to be willing to do this time in their free time, late at nights, holiday time. But I know that's what our SENCO does, because she is such a professional and making sure everything is in order.’

(P2, Principal)

However, P2 (Principal) further reiterated that the SENCO fulfilling the SENCO duties at home or in her personal time *‘is not sustainable either’*. I interpreted that Principals realise that the workload of the SENCO is extensive and that the SENCOs fulfilling their role in their own time is unsustainable but they do not have any direction on how to rectify this challenge for SENCOs. Without dedicated time for SENCO duties and policy guidance from the exosystem level this unsustainable nature of the SENCO role will continue.

P3 (Principal) when specifically asked about the amount of time the SENCO required to do their role and what were the most important responsibilities for the SENCO, he stated,

'She'd want about 30 hours in a day in fairness, I mean, like the obvious. The most important role of the SENCO is supporting teachers and Principal in their role, support each other and to identify, you know what training and what upskilling and what support they need to do their job as best they can'.

(P3, Principal)

P1 remarked that in School G, the leadership team work 'after hours' and she continued to state that, 'it is relying on the goodness of people, the good people, to give their time and look that is recognised as a promotion post'. Interestingly this Principal did consider that,

'If you are a SENCO and you didn't have a promoted post, you would start to wonder, you know, what am I doing this for? So certainly more dedicated time is extremely important.'

(P1, Principal)

Five out of six SENCOs (S1, S2, S3, SP1, SP3) interviewed indicated that their SENCO duties were mainly attended to outside of school hours, in the evenings and at the weekends or holiday time. The SENCOs noted that there was no time in their weekly timetable for their SENCO duties. S3 (SENCO) commented, 'it's all outside of school hours, none of it is through school time and no Croke Park hours wouldn't be used for it either'. S2 (SENCO) also added, 'My evenings seem to be taken up with the SENCO role' and S1 (SENCO) too ensured,

'I do not leave until half four, and I am still bringing stuff home, Like it's never ending. It's just never ending...to be honest I don't feel like I get a minute to myself...it's like the workload is horrific'.

(S1, SENCO)

S1 (SENCO) further added, 'anything that I've been asked to do, I can manage, I can do, it just takes time...it means, you know, it has to be done in the evening.'

SENCOs did highlight that there was a challenge to meet all the SET team together after school and that they did not have time during the day to get a full overview of what supports may be needed within the team and questioned if they were giving advice to others without having all the relevant details. S3 (SENCO) illustrated this when she stated,

'That is a huge role because even now like with working full time, I've to try and meet the SETS after school and even meeting four it's a lot, it's a lot of work trying to kind of meet them and support them and kind of see how things

are done, and I think if you did have more time they could actually observe more and give more correct support to the staff rather than just being able to give advice while not actually seeing the situation properly.'

(S3, SENCO)

S2 (SENCO) reiterated the difficulty of getting a dedicated time to meet with the team and having time to observe and reflect on practices within the team. S2 (SENCO) conveyed the importance of having time for these practices would enable practices that were more effective within the SENCO role and within the team. This SENCO stated,

'Uh time on the timetable to be able to do some of your role within school hours like just to be able to pop around to classrooms to liaise quickly with teachers, or even just to observe different practises within different classrooms. Um, just to be able to do your role, maybe a bit more effectively. Um, not everyone is available before school and after school to be able to liaise with them. And even times just to like you, whether it's emails or whatever, a lot of staff don't want to be contacted outside of school hours. And sometimes I find that is quite a challenge and everything has to be scheduled. But yeah, It's time. It's time to get everything. Everything done.'

(S2, SENCO)

Finally in School F, SP3 (SENCO Principal) too noted, *'there are not enough hours in the day'* when she referred to the SENCO role, she continued to say, *'but look, you just fit it in, you just do it'*. Clearly, it was acknowledged in all schools that the SENCOs, SENCO Principals and Principals thought that SENCOs did not have sufficient time to fulfil their roles effectively. SP3 (SENCO Principal) declared, *'We are always following our tail, we are always trying to catch up so time is a big, big, big, barrier (to the SENCO role).'*

6.3.2 Inadequate external professional services leads to a fragmentation of support

The data indicate that SENCOs and school staff feel unsupported and somewhat isolated due to inadequate access to external professional services, which are under resourced and/ or non-existent. Schools do not have the support of the professional services to assist pupils by being able to assess and provide recommendations on interventions and to implement the interventions. In School A, S1 noted, *'you feel like*

you are on your own’ and you *‘try to reach out....but we are trying to do things ourselves’*. SP2 (SENCO Principal) commented that in relation to supports from outside agencies that *‘schools are very much alone at the moment’*. In School D, SP1 also agreed and added that, *‘the frustrating part is when you are trying to figure out what you can do to help the child, but you are on your own’*. In School I, P1 (Principal), clearly articulated that pupils are not getting the supports they need in school, when he stated,

‘I think we have to be careful that the children are getting proper supports within school and that doesn't seem to be the case because we've problems obviously with the services, the area of intervention services are obviously in a very severe state and they don't have resources that they need and I think that's something that really, like it's brushed over by government, but it's a very serious situation.’

(P1, Principal)

This was also conveyed in School A, when S1 (SENCO) commented,

‘we are being let down by all of the outside agencies through no fault of their own. I do not know what the staffing crisis is, but it seems to hit every single one of them.’

(S1, SENCO)

All participants indicated that there were inadequacies in many services and that at times some were not accessible and non-existent. S1 (SENCO) outlined, *‘so this year we do not have a designated NEPS psychologist’*, and she added that this was due to staff retiring within the service, i.e. NEPS. S1 (SENCO) did explain that there was access to psychologists covering in the interim (SCAPA) but noted, *‘they are not ideal for complex cases’*. In this school, School A, the Principal was advised by NEPS to seek support from other sources. S1 (SENCO) recounted,

‘My Principal rang NEPS and said, look, this is ridiculous, we are a school with 640, we have no NEPS psychologist, what are we going to do? So he came down and he spoke to us, and said, look, you know, the assessment of need process is always a great, is always a good avenue to go.’

(S1, SENCO)

In School C, the limitations of availability within NEPS was not supporting the SENCO in fulfilling their role. Challenges in prioritising pupils for assessment and challenges in pupils transitioning to secondary school without assessment were indicated, as S3 (SENCO) explained,

'The waiting lists, it's huge. We have a child in sixth class now who could do with an assessment, but there's others that have to be prioritised above her and you're like you feel guilty then sending them off to secondary without the assessment. She has her Irish exemption...but you still kind of feel you haven't done as much as you can, but it's limitations of availability of NEPS and you know you have we had to prioritise the ones that were multi disability type to NEPS or that warrant a clear cut that it is a literacy difficulty'.

(S1, SENCO)

SP1 (SENCO Principal) indicated that in more recent times the area in which the school needed support from NEPS was related to *'social and emotional'* and that *'it's not like literacy or numeracy based but NEPS are inadequate'* in supporting the pupils or them as a school.

SENCOs in Schools A, B and C were supporting children while they were awaiting engagement from external professional services. S2 (SENCO) commented that due to the amount of time pupils were on waiting lists for the external professional services they needed, that they were *'playing catch up'* when supporting the pupils. S2 (SENCO) elaborated and stated,

'We are trying to tape up...the different needs the children have until the time that they are meeting their SLT or their OT or their psychologist, whether it be through their assessment of need or even private waiting lists as well, so that is definitely a struggle. Even having those conversations with parents and talking about how long these waiting lists are. That is definitely a challenge, and what can we do, sometimes we do not have the answer and sometimes we do not know what we can do until the time they meet the professionals.'

(S2, SENCO)

The three SENCOs (S1, S2, S3) concurred that they can only do so much when children are on waiting lists. S1 (SENCO) asserted, *'we are not occupational therapist, and we are not speech and language therapists and we are not behaviour analysts'* and she also noted,

'The child ends up on a waiting list for OT, for speech and language, perhaps an educational assessment, perhaps a clinical assessment, like the whole country is bogged down in waiting lists.'

(S1, SENCO)

Participants in Schools E, F and H commented and explained that they have brought in professional services to support their pupils and the staff and they have paid for these services. In School H, P2 (Principal) indicated that pupils that were in need

of support due to trauma could get to a critical point and the school had no access to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for support. He declared,

‘The problem with CAMHS is, well it is just that we feel that children have reached the threshold, that they are in such a bad way and we cannot get access to CAMHS. The school had even at some stage, we have brought in art therapy into the school, and the Board of Management has paid for it for a class where the trauma has been experienced’

(P2, Principal)

In School F, SP3 indicated that they too had employed a speech and language therapist, she stated,

‘You see the services we get from the HSE are as you know I am sure everyone talks about it are brutal’. SP3 explained that the speech and language therapist comes into the school each Friday and ‘she would talk to me and the class teacher and she would talk and do speech and language with the children. We like that we do not only just use her in the ASD class but also if there is a child with language problems. We would be asking for advice from her as well, so anywhere at all we can get a bit of good advice it is fantastic.’

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

In School E, SP2 (SENCO Principal) explained that he was fundraising to bring services into the school and that his main role was getting the supports and services into the school as *‘children were not attending appointments’* if they were already in the system. SP3 also commented that children in need of support who, *‘had not ever had any link in with services outside of the school were presenting a lot of challenges regarding behaviour and the school was unclear how to support the pupils’*.

SP3 asserted that when her school opened a special class that the school was then left without resources and professional supports to support the children in their care. Regarding this she stated,

‘....the lack of resources and the lack of professional support is huge. I mean, you end up taking in ASD classes and you are left with just the ASD classes and no outside support which is not right really, but that is the way it is.’

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

It was apparent from the data that the SENCOs were calling out for supports to assist them in the absence or inadequate support from professional services. S3 (SENCO) indicated that it *‘is hard to get the right support at times’*. An indication

that the SENCOs' role is difficult when support is restricted due to policy guidance is suggested when S3 (SENCO) stated, *'access to extra supports like there are children that are scoring so badly but because they are not (within the range of) average ability then they can't access assistive technology'*. In relation to the identification of needs for support S3 (SENCO) did convey,

'more supports are needed on identifying needs, like the NCSE are brilliant, but it can take ages to get them, because there just is not enough people. So like could there be a leader per county, or could there be something that the supports are more readily available and that we know exactly who to go to without having to jump through all these hoops filling in the portal bits.'

(S3, SENCO)

In summary, the acute awareness of the extensive and nebulous nature of the SENCO role that emerged highlighted many commonalities across schools. The Principals and SENCOs spoke of the lack of external supports to guide them as they are currently working in a space that has no policy to specify what the role entails. Furthermore, issues emerged in relation to SENCOs not having sufficient time to fulfil their professional responsibilities within school time and also the lack and inadequate supports that schools are currently receiving from external professional services. A summary of the key factors that acted as barriers to the SENCO in enacting the role are presented in Figure 6.11.



Figure 6.11: Key factors that acted as barriers to the SENCO in enacting the role.

6.4 Theme Four: Principals’ and SENCOs’ insights into future directions of the role.

This section relates to insights into what Principals and SENCOs think are required to address the challenges and ambiguities that exist for the SENCO in enacting their role. The data suggest that there is a requirement for official guidance at government level (exosystem and macrosystem) specific to the role of the SENCO. Currently the lack of guidance and role recognition is limiting the potential of the SENCO role to lead and advance inclusion in schools. The data also suggests that there is a need for further professional learning for SENCOs in specific areas and this could be addressed as part of a postgraduate programme, which is specific to the SENCO role. The need for dedicated non-teaching time to support the sustainability of the SENCO role is also indicated in the data. Finally, it is clear that SENCOs and Principals are experiencing

a lack of support and collaboration from outside professional agencies and they are calling for adequate support and collaboration from the agencies in terms of assessment, identification and intervention, which should be accessible and available. As previously mentioned the mesosystem is sparsely populated with a lack of external agency collaboration occurring. Without the communities of practice and professional learning bodies the mesosystem could potentially be empty. There are four sub-themes in this section, which are outlined in Figure 6.12.

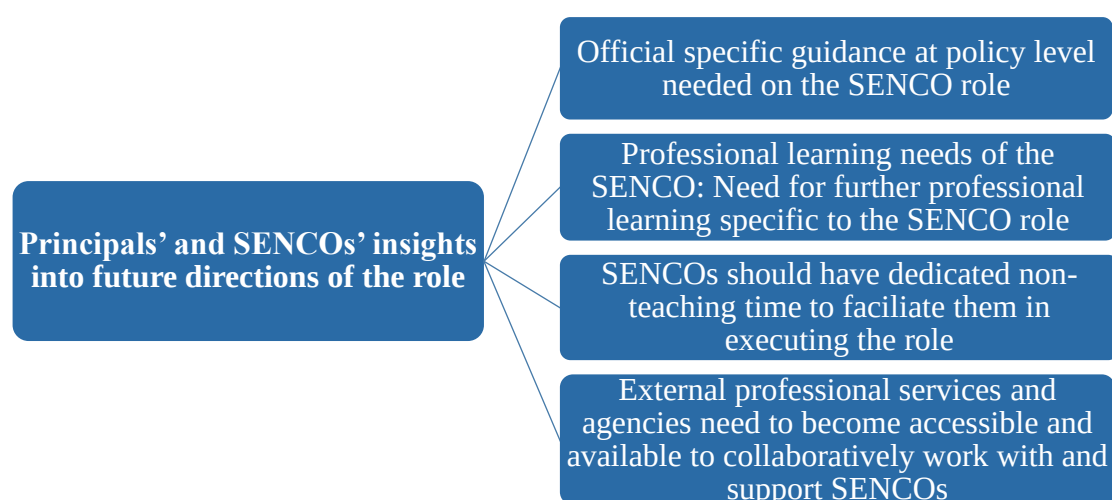


Figure 6.12: Theme Four and related sub-themes.

The findings presented in the fourth theme set out, in part, to answer the following research question:

- What are the professional learning needs of SENCOs and supports needed to allow them to effectively enact their role?

6.4.1 Official specific guidance at policy level needed on the SENCO role

The importance of gaining specific guidance at policy level on the SENCO role emerged strongly from the data. Across all of the schools, Principals and SENCOs spoke of the need for unambiguous guidelines and more clarity on the SENCO role. S2 (SENCO) outlined the need for clarification on the role, when she insisted on the

need for *‘more guidance on what is expected and to know exactly what we are supposed to be doing and providing a course that could support us in furthering professional support there’*. The Principal in School I, also called for the role to be *‘defined’* (P3, Principal). He further added that there was a need for the identification and prioritisation of the responsibilities of the role, when he stated, *‘I think that the Department needs to look at the role and identify, prioritise what the role actually is and make that specific and implement training on it’* (P3, Principal). SP3, the SENCO Principal in School F represented the views of all participants when she said, *‘I think it should be a named post of responsibility that everybody should have in a school’*. All Principals and SENCOs shared the view that it was important for the SENCO to have a named post on the leadership team within the school. SP3 (SENCO Principal) commented,

‘You know there has to be an AP2 post and it is the SENCO role and that’s it. You know, so if you lose your SENCO AP2 person, then the next person who applies for it, she knows that they are going into the AP2 SENCO role. Needs to be formalised I think.’

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

In School H, the Principal did outline the importance of the positioning of the SENCO within the school when he stated,

‘they would need to be seen along the lines of a leadership member, if it is not a leadership team member that is doing the SENCO role, then it would actually have to be one of the leadership roles.’

(P2, Principal)

It was certainly a common thread throughout the data that, *‘there was very little (support) for the SENCO’* at government level and that *‘this title just appeared’* (SP3, SENCO Principal). In School D, the SENCO Principal stated,

‘If the government, if the department is true to its word and saying that children are entitled to an education, give us a specific SENCO, give us a specific role to lead this education, especially in light of the legal obligation if the EPSEN Act in the current times. It is very simple, give us the personnel to provide the children with the best possible education and they will get it. Not a mismatch of hoping that a school has the expertise or hoping that teachers have the willingness to upskill themselves, do what they do in other countries and get state mandated continuous professional development.’

(SP1, SENCO Principal)

6.4.2 There is a need for further professional learning specific to the SENCO role

The data has clearly highlighted a gap in the professional learning needs of SENCOs. The participants indicated that there is no formal professional learning for the SENCO role. The Principal in School I, considered the importance of formally educating SENCOs, *'formal learning, you know a qualification in SENCO would be excellent.'* (P3, Principal). SP2, the SENCO Principal in School E noted, *'I wouldn't have received or gotten correspondence about any in-service training as SENCO'*. S1 (SENCO) conveyed that she was not aware of a course specifically for SENCOs when she said, *'I don't know of anything.... But if there was, if I knew there was a course for Special Ed coordinators, I would happily do it, but I am just not aware of one'* (S1, SENCO). The importance to SENCOs being supported by and through professional learning was indicated in the data. In School A, the SENCO declared,

'I don't know that it needs to be a whole diploma thing, but definitely, if there was some kind of a course to guide the SENCOs in the role so that they would feel supported, not so much within their school but from the departments point of view, at least you know that you were on the right track.'

(S1, SENCO)

Both SENCOs and Principals were in support of SENCO specific professional learning. The Principal in School I (P2) indicated that it would add more professionalism to a role that is ever changing and commented as follows:

'I think we have had it for special education, we had it for mentoring, I think it is a very good idea, I think the role is very specific and it is ever changing. I think that studying it and giving people the opportunity to work on a more professional basis, get more knowledge, that would be great.'

(P2, Principal)

This Principal also insisted that a SENCO specific course should incorporate aspects of leadership as the SENCO is leading people in the area of SEN and working with best practice when he stated,

'I think from being involved in the role you know that obviously you have a leadership role as well as the SENCO, the SENCO has a big leadership role, you know you are convincing other people, you are leading in the area of SEN and you are working with best practice. I think that would be very important.'

(P2, Principal)

The Principal in School H illustrated his view in support of SENCOs having a SEN specific postgraduate that had leadership elements specifically for SENCOs. Regarding this, he stated,

‘There is definitely a need for some type of a course for SENCO duties definitely. Maybe an overlap with some third level postgrad to do with the role in SEN, before you take on the role of SENCO, or possibly in their first year of the job. The SENCO duties are very much management and leading so there is a massive overlap needed, there is an overlap there with leadership courses, it would be different to just SET, it is different learning. It has to be specific as well for SENCOs and to be aligned with the Irish curriculum and the inclusiveness that is out there...Also break it down into the whole logistics of carrying out the role, having the skill set. And probably in an ICT way as well of streaming timetables and coordinating hours.’

(P2, Principal)

SP3 (SENCO Principal) in School F, was of the same opinion and outlined that the SENCOs need professional learning in leadership when she said,

‘it’s a leadership role and they can learn how to lead, how to bring people along and how to manage people, learn a few tricks of the trade, that everybody needs to know as regards being a leader, because it’s a big role.’

(SP3. SENCO Principal)

When consideration was given to the possible elements that should be included in a SENCO specific course it was not only areas within SEN and leadership that were indicated by the data as being important but also learning related to evidenced-based practices and the newest initiatives available. SP3 (SENCO Principal) highlighted that *‘things, ideas are changing and there is new things being written all the time by researchers and educationalists’*. She spoke of the need to engage with third-level institutions *‘to disseminate what they know into schools’* and stated,

‘You are getting the best of the best in there (third-level institutions), the newest initiatives that are on stream. You are getting best practice. You are getting things that are evidenced based, so I think that is so important to know. It’s coming from the experts, these people that are reading the research, and then it’s the only way to disseminate it into schools by doing a course on this.’

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

S3 (SENCO) in School C did see the value of a SENCO doing a postgraduate programme in SEN but believed there was more needed in such a programme to ensure that it is applicable to a SENCO. S3 stated,

‘The postgrad in SEN has a lot of bits that would be applicable but there is a lot more like, Irish exemptions, like assistive technology, all those (applications) that are not applicable to every SET teacher, things that would just be applicable to management.’

(S3, SENCO)

While the SENCOs interviewed were undertaking various forms of professional learning, this was in the general area of SEN and the Continuum of Support and not specifically related to the management and leadership of SEN. The lack of SENCO specific professional learning was also indicated by SP3, who highlighted the desire and value for this type of professional learning:

‘...but as regards specific in-service for the SENCO, I don't think that's there. You know, I would love to see something more formal. The home school liaisons, the school completion people, they have their specific training. Where as I don't think there's that for SENCOs, which I think would be of great value.’

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

SP3 (SENCO Principal) asserted that there should be release time for SENCOs to do in-service, similar to the in-service that is available to Home School Liaison teachers, when she stated,

‘Nobody ever gave us any in-service on what is a SENCO role?...nobody ever said we can release you as the SENCO to do some in-service. If you are a home school liaison teacher, you get released every so often and everybody meets and sits down and they go through the job and what is best practice in that job, whereas that does not happen for SENCOs and I think that would be very valuable.’

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

Similarly, the Principal in School I, added that there was a need for in-service but also to provide education to trainee teachers on the role and that this in turn would create an awareness of the role. P3 remarked,

‘I think that the department needs to look at the role and identify, prioritise what the role actually is and make that specific and implement training on it. Formalising it in college and formalising a course for it, this should be done.....it would give other people the opportunity to get to know the SENCO role and see exactly what is involved and give a learning to it.’

(P3, Principal)

One of the SENCO Principals, SP2, had completed third-level professional learning in leadership but not related to SEN. SP2 noted that ideally the SENCO should have professional learning in the area of SEN, as follows:

'My Master's was in leadership, but it wouldn't be directly related to the SENCO world. Like ideally you know qualifications are what they are, but ideally you should have somebody who has done some research or some aspect of study within SENCO...'

(SP2, SENCO Principal)

Interestingly, P2 (Principal) articulated that any SENCO professional learning should have a practical aspect to it where the SENCO could visit other schools. He explained,

'I think we learn an awful lot from each other. I think just like teaching practice, a teacher goes into a school, observes what they see, might be with a school for a week and sits with the SENCO in that school and with SEN in that school. I think provision of that would be fantastic...I think people are more open to that, more school now wouldn't have a problem with that. Schools are all different, I think giving the opportunity for SENCOs to see that will help the learning process as well. Obviously formal exams and formal methodologies where you are learning in that you are doing a dissertation etc....I think that would be a good idea'.

(P3, Principal)

An overview of the key elements related to the Principals' and SENCOs' insights into the future direction of professional learning for the SENCO role are displayed in Figure 6.13.



Figure 6.13: Elements of professional learning for the SENCO role.

6.4.3 SENCOs should have dedicated non-teaching time to facilitate them in executing the role

All Principals and SENCOs asserted that it would be imperative to have dedicated non-teaching time for fulfilling the SENCOs' responsibilities and duties. The data indicated that participants concurred that all schools should have a mandated SENCO specific post and specific professional learning for the SENCO role. The importance of having dedicated scheduled non-teaching time for SENCO specific duties was also relayed by the participants. P2 (Principal) in School H spoke of the importance of the SENCO role having a leadership role within the school as this would allow for scheduled time for the SENCO role, when he asserted,

'It would actually have to be one of the leadership roles where they need dedicated release time from their teaching duties to carry out the role, almost like Principal release days. You know that they would have like teaching

Principal school that a SENCO would have a number of release dates for them to carry out their SENCO duties alone. And I think that would be a step forward....there is definitely a need for release days.'

(P2, Principal)

Similarly, P1 (Principal) conveyed that '*certainly more dedicated time is extremely important*' and she considered that in supporting schools and SENCOs, '*seriously reduced hours would be helpful*'. This Principal believed to support collaborative practices within her team and school, reduced contact time within the class would allow for more collaboration. In relation to this P1 stated, '*it is a bit crazy that the only time the Principal gets to meet her team is outside school hours*'. It was not only Principals that reported the need for dedicated non-teaching time, SENCOs also conveyed their frustrations when they considered trying to fulfil their role and at times they find it challenging to meet their teams as there is no scheduled time during school hours. S2 (SENCO) spoke of the difficulty of trying to meet with staff when she stated,

'Not everybody is available before school and after school to be able to liaise with them. And even times, whether it is emails or whatever, a lot of staff do not want to be contacted outside of school hours. I find that quite a challenge and everything has to be scheduled.'

(S2, SENCO)

The SENCO in School C relayed her frustrations in not having time provided for certain activities that could not possibly be done until after school hours. S3 (SENCO) did outline the challenge of ensuring that everything is completed on time as '*certain agencies that only open at certain times and if you are waiting after school, they are closed*'. The comparison of Principal release days was indicated again in the data, when S3 (SENCO) declared,

'It would definitely be worthwhile having extra time, even like the Principal release days. If the SENCO had release days at specific times of the year, if you had 10 SENCO released days a year. Just to give you time to actually do those things that you cannot do on a regular day cause you are teaching the full day.'

(S3, SENCO)

The SENCO Principal in School D, was of the view that SENCOs need dedicated non-teaching time but due to the current allocation model that '*the SENCO*

is usually a SET teacher and you miss your contact time so there should be 5 hours added on to every schools allocation for SEN'. It was reiterated again by SP1 (SENCO Principal) that the SENCO should have release time like teaching Principals and if 'the SENCO is a SET teacher the SENCO should have one day like the teaching Principals have one day for planning'. This was reflected by S1(SENCO) who remarked,

'what would be great would be if the department recognised the SENCO role and gave some administrative time, depending on the size of your school or depending on the size of your team.'

(S1, SENCO)

Another SENCO, who was also a Principal indicated that the SENCO in a school should have dedicated non-teaching time and that this should be scheduled in during the week. Regarding this SP3 (SENCO Principal) stated,

'Maybe a couple of hours that they do not have to do teaching, maybe two or three hours a week, that they could concentrate on their SENCO role, that's free of pupil-teacher contact time. I think that would be beneficial.'

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

6.4.4 External professional services and agencies need to become accessible and available to collaboratively work and support SENCOs

All the SENCOs and Principals highlighted the need for support from external professional agencies and services. The areas of support that were called for varied from receiving information and advice for teachers, support for assessment, shorter waiting times for assessment, intervention and therapy, and an intervention plan for children in need of support. The data indicated that a multi-disciplinary team approach to the development of support plans was not in existence in the schools. SP3 (SENCO Principal) believed that external professionals have a place at the table when support plans are being devised. Regarding this she stated,

'I presume a NEPS psychologist or a speech and language therapist could give a day in schools and do up a proper school plan, you know, with the proper people and the proper inputs from the professionals involved. But unfortunately that does not happen'

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

All the SENCOs and Principals interviewed spoke of the inadequacies in the services provided by external professional agencies and the waiting lists, the missed appointments and children being discharged from services because of missed appointments. SP2 (SENCO Principal) illustrated that as a SENCO he is in desperate need for external professionals to support his role and the pupils in School E, when he declared,

‘That’s why my role as SENCO and as deputy principal was ostensibly to go out into the community to get support and services, to raise money, to fundraise, to go to private businesses, agencies, universities, charities, to try and raise money to bring the support to the school because traditionally, the way it works is for children who want access to services it’s done outside the school. They go to the HSE or the community workshops. What we’ve been kind of highlighting and stressing is that they should be coming to us. We have all the children in one place, under one roof and as often as not, these children aren’t attending the appointments in the community, so why not come to the school when they’re here? So that turns into a big bureaucratic mess because you have the likes of the HSE on one side, the likes of UL or private agencies on the other, and there’s no crossing over between the two. There’s no communication between the two. So the big challenge we have is we’ve actually raised money but now we can’t actually get to staff to come in to, to work in the school. That’s, and continuity of services, as in I can bring in a speech and language therapist for six weeks, but I need 3 speech and language therapists all day everyday throughout the whole-school year.’

(SP2, SENCO Principal)

This SENCO highlighted the need for multi-agency and school collaborations to take place in order to support the SENCO in achieving better outcomes for their pupils. The SENCO Principal in School F spoke about a more coordinated approach required between SENCOs and external professionals such as Speech and Language Therapist, Occupational Therapists and other professionals, as follows:

‘I think there needs to be a more coordinated approach with the SENCO role in that it’s not just with these children it’s not just the teaching, it’s the other things as well, like the SLTs, OTs and all those other professionals. There needs to be more time allowed for that.’

(SP3, SENCO Principal)

In summary, the insights from the Principals and SENCOs considered the challenges and ambiguities that exist for the SENCO role. The data encapsulate the void of official guidance at government level specific to the role of the SENCO. The potential of the SENCO role, as leader to advancing inclusion in schools is limited by

the lack of role recognition and guidance and necessary supports. Furthermore, emerging from the data was the need for further formalised professional learning for SENCOs in areas of leadership, evidenced informed practices, up-to- date research on initiatives aligned to the Irish curriculum, and ICT skills relevant for the role. The data offered that this further professional learning specific to SENCOs, could be part of a postgraduate programme with an element of a practical placement. The data suggests that there is a need for dedicated non-teaching time and a SENCO specific post of responsibility for the SENCO to effectively enact their role. Finally, the SENCOs and Principals are experiencing a lack of support from external professional agencies and they are calling for adequate support and collaboration from the agencies in terms of assessment, identification and intervention, which are accessible and available.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented the research's qualitative findings, which were uncovered from the semi-structured interview data. Four themes emerged and revealed what duties and practices SENCOs are undertaking in the role of the SENCO, what supports the SENCO to fulfil their SENCO role and responsibilities and what barriers exist for the SENCOs. The findings also revealed the professional learning needs for SENCOs and the supports needed for the SENCO role.

The first theme unveiled that SENCOs are leading and managing the SEN provision in a collaborative manner, at every level of the Continuum of Support within the microsystem of the school. The findings showed that SENCOs are leading whole-school approaches to collaboration and that school-wide systems are in use to devise and implement SEN policy; lead the SET team and all staff in the coordination of SEN provision; identify pupils and coordinate supports and initiatives for identified needs; and identify and lead the professional learning in the area of supporting additional needs within the school.

The second theme highlighted that it is the SENCOs' expertise and the knowledge that supports the SENCO to build connections in every facet of the microsystem and mesosystem, which then affords them to lead the provision of SEN. Connections were built with pupils, parents, teachers, support staff, Principals,

management teams and external agencies, (if available to that school community) due to the existence of a collaborative culture created by a supportive Principal and in turn supportive staff.

The third theme, delved into the extensive and ambiguous nature of the SENCO role that emerged and which demonstrated many commonalities across schools. The Principals and SENCOs spoke of the lack of external supports on policy to guide them from the exosystem level, as they are currently working in a space that has no policy to specify what the role entails. Another issue that emerged was in relation to SENCOs not having sufficient time to fulfil their professional responsibilities within school time and also the desperate lack of supports and inadequate supports that schools are currently receiving from external professional services. This has resulted in a sparsely populated mesosystem.

The final theme gave insights from the Principals and SENCOs on what they thought was required to address the challenges and ambiguities that existed for the SENCO role. The data highlighted the vacuum of official guidance at government level (exosystem and macrosystem) specific to the role of the SENCO. The limitations of the SENCO advancing inclusive practices in schools is exacerbated by lack of role recognition and guidance at macrosystem level. The issue of formalising professional learning for SENCOs in areas of leadership, evidenced based practices, up-to-date research on initiatives aligned to the Irish curriculum, and ICT skills relevant for the role was unearthed. The data offered some possibilities of how this further professional learning, specific to SENCOs, could be part of a postgraduate programme with an element of a practical placement. The insights of the importance of having dedicated non-teaching time and a SENCO specific post of responsibility for the SENCO to effectively enact their role were noted in this theme. This theme concluded with insights from the SENCOs and Principals relating to their experiences of the lack of support from external professional agencies at the mesosystem and microsystem level. The SENCOs and Principals are calling for adequate support and collaboration from the agencies in terms of assessment, identification and intervention, which are accessible and available with a system to work collaboratively with SENCOs in the future. The next chapter will now discuss the findings to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences while placing them within the wider arena of existing research and with reference to the theoretical model.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION

7.0 Introduction

This chapter will integrate and interpret the findings of Phase One and Phase Two of this sequential study to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of SENCOs in the context of the relevant literature and the theoretical framework. Chapter Five provided insight into the profile and status of SENCOs in Ireland and the experiences of the SENCOs in leading SEN provision. Chapter Six provided an in-depth examination of the realities of the SENCO role from the perspectives of SENCOs and Principals. The factors that enabled and inhibited the SENCOs in their efforts to lead inclusive special education together with the professional needs of SENCO were also examined. These findings are framed within the context of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Bioecological Systems Theory, which will be used in this chapter to delve into the meanings behind these experiences and extend the current knowledge in this area. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Bioecological Systems Theory, which holds the SENCO at the centre, will be used to explore how SENCOs lead inclusive special education through interaction with the surrounding systems.

The findings from this research extend our knowledge of the SENCO role due to the national large-scale nature of this study and the subsequent in-depth interviews with both SENCOs and Principals. The sample size (n=371) in Phase One represents SENCOs from various school contexts and is the largest study of primary school SENCOs in Ireland, thus providing a meaningful reflection of the profile, the status, the professional learning needs and realities of the SENCO community. Approximately 90,680 primary pupils were represented in Phase One and there was variation within the sample regarding school size, DEIS status, school catchment area, school type, and class type (mainstream and mainstream with special classes). Previous research on the SENCO role in Ireland lacked this large-scale element and were essentially small-scale in nature. Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) conducted a survey-based study but the sample consisted of only 27 SENCOs and was in a post-primary setting. Colum and Mac Ruairc (2023) conducted research with primary school SENCOs in Ireland but this interview based qualitative study had a limited sample size of four. Walsh (2020) undertook a PhD research project looking at how support teachers contribute to the leadership and management of SEN provision in

primary schools but this research did not specifically focus on SENCOs and only included eight mainstream schools in the qualitative data collection.

Overall, Phase One and Two found that the majority of SENCOs are knowledgeable, experienced, hold posts of responsibility and are part of the senior leadership team in schools. The findings unveiled that SENCOs are leading and managing SEN provision in schools using collaborative approaches. The insights gained point to SENCOs leading key aspects in the provision of SEN through collaborative and distributed approaches ensuring compliance with and accountability to policy, whilst advocating for pupils with additional needs and for an inclusive special education agenda. It is somewhat of a balancing act for SENCOs who are busy interpreting and being compliant with policy; being mediators of change; influencing whole-school staff and SETs on new practices, learning programmes and school-wide collaborative systems; and scheduling planning times for meeting. The SENCOs are undertaking all these roles whilst managing differing opinions between class teachers and SETs and ensuring that pupils with additional needs are catered for, included and not marginalised. Various contextual factors, from both the microsystem and mesosystem levels, enabled the SENCOs in their role enactment and these included: a culture of collaboration within the school; supportive colleagues and Principals; experience and knowledge; professional learning; and being connected through communities of practice. Notwithstanding this, challenges stemming from outside the school's microsystem emerged that added to the complexities of the SENCO role in leading and implementing the provision of SEN. These included: a lack of time; extensive workload; inadequate external professional support; holding multiple roles; and ambiguous and limited policy guidance. It was clear that all participants conveyed commitment, enthusiasm and advocated for pupils and for the promotion of inclusive practices.

This chapter is organised around the research questions and themes that emerged from Phase One and Phase Two and illustrate how this PhD contributes to and extends our knowledge and understanding of the SENCO role in the primary school setting. The various sections, guided to an extent by the conceptual map derived from Phase Two (Figure 6.1), are as follows:

- What are the demographics and profile of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools? (What do they look like?)
- What are the roles and responsibilities of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools? (SENCOs are leading and managing school-wide collaborative approaches to SEN provision)
- What are the perceived enablers to enactment of the SENCO role? (Knowledgeable, connected and experienced SENCOs are enabled by supportive staff and Principals and a culture of collaboration).
- What are the perceived barriers to enactment of the SENCO role? (The extensive nebulous nature of the SENCO role has evolved in a policy vacuum with insufficient time and adequate support from external professional services)
- What are the professional learning needs of SENCOs and supports needed to allow them to effectively enact their role? (Principals' and SENCOs' insights into future directions of the role).

7.1 What are the demographics and profile of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?

In this section, the results pertaining to the demographics and profile of SENCOs in Ireland are discussed. This is the first large-scale study that provides insight into the profile of SENCOs in Ireland. Previous work by Fitzgerald (2015, 2017), Walsh (2020), Colum and Mac Ruairc (2023) study of the SENCO population involved just four SENCOs and Fitzgerald's work focused on the post-primary setting. Therefore, the insights derived from this PhD can provide an accurate picture of the status-quo in Ireland and extends our understanding and knowledge of the context of the SENCO role. In England some large-scale survey work has been done by Curran and Boddison (2021) and reference will be made to this work in this section. Curran and Boddison (2021) undertook a survey-based national survey of SENCOs in England and had 1,903 responses from a potential pool of 20,217 primary and secondary schools. Of the 1,903 responses, 67% were SENCOs in primary schools (approximately n=1,275), however Curran and Boddison (2021) in general, report the findings of the participant group as a whole in their paper. The results in this section are discussed under two

headings related to gender, role type, education, experience and qualifications; and post of responsibility and SLT membership.

7.1.1 Gender, role type, education, experience and qualifications

An overwhelming majority of the SENCOs in Phase One were female (91.6%). This aligns very much with the large-scale study by Curran and Boddison (2021) who found that 94% were females. In Ireland, Fitzgerald (2015) conducted a survey of 27 post-primary school SENCOs and reported that 85% were female. In Phase One, it was evident that the majority of SENCOs had greater than 21+ years' experience (54.5%), which is higher than the results from Fitzgerald (2015) who noted that 37% had over 21+ years' experience. In Phase Two, the average years of teaching experience of the 6 interviewed SENCOs was similar at 22.8 years. It appears that SENCOs in Ireland have significant experience in teaching, which has been identified as an enabler to SENCO role enactment. Regarding SENCO specific experience this was somewhat limited in the cohort sampled in this study. Phase One revealed that the majority had less than 5 years SENCO experience (65.5%) and Phase Two reported that the six SENCOs had on average 3.3 years experience as a SENCO, which is echoed in the results from Fitzgerald (2015) where 78% of SENCOs had less than 10 years experience. The results from Curran and Boddison (2021) also revealed that 75% had less than 8 years experience. The findings from Phase One could be a reflection of the emerging nature of the role in Ireland and the lack of formal recognition of the role from the Department of Education (exosystem). Finally, the SENCOs in Phase One had varied SEN experience with the majority (67.4%) having less than 10 years experience. Comparative research does not specify SEN specific teaching experience so the data in this area is somewhat limited. It could be inferred that the SENCOs in Ireland had extensive teaching experience with moderate SEN related experience and limited experience as SENCOs.

All the SENCOs, except one, in Phase One had other responsibilities alongside their SENCO role. Most of the SENCOs were SETs and SENCOs (41.2%) with one-fifth being Principals and SENCOs and just over a quarter being Deputy Principals and SENCOs. A small number of SENCOs held multiple roles such as Principal, SET and SENCO or Class teacher, Deputy Principal and SENCO. In England, Curran and

Boddison (2021) in their large-scale study noted that 48% of the primary school SENCOs had teaching responsibilities along with their SENCO role, while only 8% of all respondents (primary and post-primary SENCOs) had no additional responsibilities other than the SENCO role. In this study, the authors commented that the breadth of additional responsibilities that the SENCOs held included ‘safeguarding lead, designated teacher for looked after children, and English as an additional language lead’ (Curran and Boddison 2021, p.43). Curran and Boddison (2021) noted that this scenario confirms the suggestions from Ekins (2015, p.59) who commented that there has been a move away from the traditional role of the SENCO, for some, to one of inclusion coordinator with a widening of responsibilities for ‘vulnerable groups’. In Ireland, the results from Phase One indicate that the SENCO is without doubt completing the role along with other roles, which include teaching and senior leadership responsibilities. This may potentially present challenges to the SENCO as the findings from both phases indicate that holding multiple roles is a barrier to SENCO role enactment.

In Phase One the results indicated that the majority had a postgraduate qualification but over half (51.3%) did not have a SEN specific postgraduate qualification. For Phase Two, five out of the six SENCOs had a postgraduate qualification and half had a SEN-related qualification. Fitzgerald (2015) reported that 78% of the 27 post-primary school SENCOs had a SEN specific qualification and in England, Curran and Boddison (2021) 76% of the combined primary and post-primary school SENCOs had completed or were completing the NASENCO in England. While it is encouraging that a substantial number of SENCOs in Ireland have postgraduate qualifications and just less than half have SEN specific qualifications the lower percentage compared to England is reflective of the non-mandated nature of postgraduate professional learning for SENCOs in Ireland and the lack of access to the Department of Education funded postgraduate diploma in SEN programme. Research highlights the importance of accredited Master’s level postgraduate professional learning for SENCOs to develop the critical literacies, theoretical underpinnings, research skills and legislative understandings necessary for SENCOs to develop their capacity to advocate for those pupils at risk of marginalisation and exclusion (Done *et al.* 2023).

7.1.2 Post of responsibility and SLT membership

Within Ireland the SENCO role is not mandated or formally recognised as an assigned post of responsibility within the primary school setting (Fitzgerald and Radford 2020; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023). Despite this lack of official recognition of the SENCO role from the Department of Education at the exosystem level, organically it appears to have evolved and this large-scale study has revealed that a majority of SENCOs hold posts of responsibilities (thus holding positional leadership) related to the coordination of SEN (72.8%, Phase One; all SENCOs Phase Two) and are part of SLTs (89%, Phase One; all SENCOs Phase Two). This contrasts with previous research, which reported lower SENCO representation on middle and senior leadership structures in Irish schools (Fitzgerald and Radford 2020). Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) reported that more than half of post-primary SENCOs did not hold a post of responsibility but this was a small-scale study of 27 Irish SENCOs. In England, the percentage was also lower with only 62% of primary SENCOs being part of the SLT due to the SENCO role, despite formal role recognition in that jurisdiction (Curran and Boddison 2021). Holding management posts, especially at senior management level, results in enhancing the SENCOs' effectiveness in their roles (Szwed 2007; O'Gorman and Drudy 2011; Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017). There is a consistent argument in the literature relating to the SENCO, that to influence school-wide inclusive practices and policies across the school microsystem, SENCOs need to have a position on the school leadership team or have a place within the management structures (Layton 2005; Travers 2010; O'Gorman and Drudy 2011; Ware *et al.* 2011; Tissot 2013; Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017; Smith and Broomhead 2019; Szeto *et al.* 2020). Having such a position can potentially result in recognition of the 'major role [that SENCOs can play] in "building capacity for improvement"' (Nasen 2010' p.2). An overwhelming majority of the SENCOs in Phase One and all the SENCOs in Phase Two in the current study were part of the SLTs in their schools, which could be indicative of the school's commitment to inclusive values and practices and to developing and maintaining an inclusive school culture (Coleman 2020). When SENCOs are not part of SLTs their ability to be agents of change is questionable (Done *et al.* 2017) and therefore the fact that nearly all of the SENCOs are part of the SLTs in Irish primary school's points to the influential role that they can play regarding the development and promotion of inclusive special education.

Over half of the SENCOs from Phase One were senior leaders (Principals, 11.5%, or deputy Principals, 45.2%) and it could be inferred that this implies a realisation of the importance of this leadership role of the SENCO within the primary school setting. Conversely, it could be indicative of a reality where senior leaders are taking on the SENCO role as there is no official role recognition or guidance on who should assume the role. Phase Two did highlight that the three SENCO Principals assumed the role as they felt that by doing so decision-making processes were more efficient, although they did emphasise that the associated workload was high. Given this extensive workload and the fact that holding multiple roles was a barrier to role enactment, it is questionable whether these already stretched Principals are best placed to undertake the SENCO role. It also emerged that these SENCO Principals felt that there was no staff member capable of taking on the role. These SENCO Principals were in smaller schools (less than 200 pupils) and thus potentially there was a smaller staff pool to choose from for the SENCO role and also a lower number of assigned post of responsibilities across these schools. Specifically, SP3 did infer that she could not give one of the SET team the SENCO role as *'nobody really had a post'*. It could also be argued that if there was a mandated SENCO role, coming from the exosystem, together with appropriate professional learning programmes, such as an accredited postgraduate qualification (mesosystem), to support and develop staff to become SENCOs then the need for Principals to assume this role would diminish. Done *et al.* (2023) have asserted that a master level accredited postgraduate is needed for SENCOs to develop their capacity to execute the role and develop the knowledge, critical literacies, and research skills to allow them to challenge decision-making and interrogate policy, legislation and rhetoric in a manner that promotes and ensures inclusive education for all.

The findings from Phase One indicate that having a post of responsibility impacted on the SENCO role and how the SENCOs viewed their status. There was a significantly greater percentage of SENCOs with a post of responsibility who had a SEN support team and systems of collaboration within their school setting. Holding a post of responsibility also increased the SENCOs' perceived status and these SENCOs strongly agreed or agreed that they 'feel my role as SENCO has status and is respected in the school' and that 'senior leadership respects and listens to my ideas for change'. SENCOs who were senior leaders (Principals or Deputy Principals) compared with

SENCOs who held middle management posts (AP1 and AP2) had a significantly higher percentage of ‘very closely and closely’ ratings regarding how the SLT works with the SEN team. In addition, the results from Phase One illustrated that SENCOs who were senior leaders had statistically significant higher agreement ratings for various statements related to how the SEN team works with the SLT, such as ‘Senior Leadership is involved with and interested in SEN provision’. These results potentially align with previous research, which has indicated that having a post of responsibility elevated the status of the role (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017). It may also indicate that having a post of responsibility at senior leadership level (principal or deputy principal) results in SENCOs working more closely, systematically and strategically with senior leadership structures within the school microsystems. However, it must be acknowledged that there is a caveat with these findings in that senior leaders themselves as SENCOs were completing the survey and their position may have biased and influenced their answers to a certain degree. Finally it is worth noting that the statistical analysis illustrated the SENCOs’ with a post of responsibility potentially valued the area of ‘Leadership and management in education’ to a greater extent than those without such a post. This cohort had a statistically significant higher percentage rating of ‘very important or important’ for this component for a postgraduate level programme of professional learning for SENCOs and it could be inferred that this is indicative of the significance that SENCOs with a post of responsibility place on the theory and knowledge related to leadership in education.

Not being part of the SLT in the school could limit ‘the SENCOs opportunities to effect real change and development within the school’ according to Ekins (2015, p.66). Furthermore, Middleton and Kay’s (2021) survey-based study with 26 SENCOs noted that being part of the SLT had a positive effect on SENCO responsibilities ‘with contributing factors including frequent communication, good working relationships and an ethos of care’. Overall, it appears that the SENCO role in Irish primary schools has evolved in practice to one where the SENCOs are positioned within the senior leadership structures of the school and thus are potentially well-placed to lead school-wide collaborative inclusive practices and policies. This is not the case for all SENCOs as evident from Phase One, though due to the ambiguous and limited policy guidance. When the SENCO is not part of SLT, it has been suggested a focus on leadership in professional learning, such as the NASENCo in England, is imperative so that these

SENCOs understand the process and landscape of senior management (Done *et al.* 2017).

Finally, the findings from Phase One illustrated that the school size and not the number of pupils with SEN in the school significantly influenced whether or not the SENCO held a post of responsibility. Larger schools have a greater number of post of responsibilities within the school due to policy guidance (Circular 0070/2018, DES 2018) coming from the Department of Education, which resides within the exosystem, and thus there is an increased opportunity for the Principal to assign a post of responsibility to the SENCO duties. Interestingly, as reflected in the findings of this study, policy guidance does not link a post of responsibility to the number of pupils with SEN although it does provide for a greater allocation of resources (DES 2017a). This enhanced allocation increases the workload of the SENCO due to the additional administrative layers, tasks and managerial responsibilities. Aligned to this, there is no formal time allocated for the SENCO for this coordination and it is not reflected in a mandated post of responsibility. This is an example of how policy changes from the exosystem impact on SENCO practices and workload in the microsystem.

7.1.3 Summary

The findings discussed in this section provide insight, from a large-scale perspective, of the profile and context of the SENCO role in Irish primary schools. This is the first large-scale study of the SENCO role in Ireland and extends our knowledge regarding the status quo of this role within the primary school setting. Limited research exists in this area and the first large-scale studies in the UK, similar to this study, have only been published recently (e.g. Curran and Boddison 2021). SENCOs in Ireland are mostly female with extensive teaching experience but limited SENCO experience due to the emerging nature of the role and a lack of formal role recognition at the exosystem level. These SENCOs have, for the most part, postgraduate qualifications. Just under half hold a SEN specific qualification, which is noteworthy considering that completing such a qualification is not mandated in Ireland. Interestingly, the majority of SENCOs in Ireland have posts of responsibility, hold positional leadership, are part of the SLT in their schools and over half are senior leaders. Therefore, they are potentially well placed to lead the inclusive agenda across their school's microsystem.

However, it is questionable whether a senior leader (Principal or Deputy Principal) is best placed to undertake the SENCO role given the significant responsibilities and workload that they already have. Holding multiple roles has been identified within this research as a barrier to SENCO role enactment.

7.2 What are the roles and responsibilities of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?

Theme One: SENCOs are leading and managing school-wide collaborative approaches to SEN provision.

The data from Phase One and Two clearly indicated that SENCOs are exceptionally busy and the role is enormous. In Phase One, the SENCOs were asked to rate the importance of 25 roles and responsibilities related to the SENCO role and 24 out of these 25 tasks had a mean rating between ‘very important’ and ‘important’. Many of these listed responsibilities, such as ‘leading and developing SEN plan, policies and procedures’, are substantial undertakings which points to the extensive nature of the SENCO role. The findings from Phase Two also point to the many responsibilities that reside with the SENCO role and indicate that the SENCOs are leading and managing school-wide collaborative approaches to SEN provision and school-wide initiatives in various subject areas for all pupils. Even though roles and responsibilities vary between SENCOs internationally, research indicates that the role is multifaceted (Kearns 2005; Takala and Ahl 2014; Smith and Broomhead 2019; Middleton and Kay 2021) and the workload associated with the role is extensive (Takala *et al.* 2009; Curran and Boddison 2021; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023).

In Phase Two, it was apparent that the SENCOs are leading and viewed as the leader in this area by all staff and as ‘*the specialist and Guru...the chief one will be the SENCO*’ (P2). The word cloud (Figure 6.3), which was derived from the Phase Two data, highlighted the words ‘leading SENCO’ which further points to the leadership role that the SENCOs occupy. As discussed in the previous section, SENCOs in Ireland are generally part of the SLT and the findings from Phase One illustrate that the majority of the SENCOs work ‘very closely’ or ‘closely’ with the SLT on the various SEN related roles and responsibilities. SENCOs are leading

through collaborative and distributed approaches using school-wide systems. There is evidence that they are acting to an extent as ‘pedagogical leads’ (Hallett 2022) and ‘advocacy leaders’ (Clarke and Done 2021). In Phase One the SENCOs were asked to rate the importance of ‘Advocating on behalf of students’ and the average rating of 1.27 implies that the SENCOs thought that this was a very important responsibility. These responsibilities are undertaken in a setting where the SENCOs are balancing their role to ensure compliance and accountability with policies that are coming from the exosystem. In this section, the roles and responsibilities of the SENCO are discussed under five headings, which are aligned to the sub-themes from Theme One of the Phase Two findings. These are as follows:

- SENCOs are leading the development and review of the school SEN policy;
- SENCOs are leading staff and the SET team in SEN provision using school-wide systems;
- SENCOs are leading the identification of pupils with additional needs;
- SENCOs are leading SEN and school initiatives; and
- SENCOs are leading staff development and professional learning within the area of SEN.

7.2.1 SENCOs are leading the development and review of the school SEN policy

Devising a school policy regarding the process of support and inclusion of students with SEN is a requirement for schools (NCSE 2011; DES 2017a). The development of such school policies must be reviewed and evaluated on a regular basis (Winter and O’Raw 2010). It is recommended by the Department of Education that this development process should be completed collaboratively involving all key stakeholders in the school community (DES 2017a). Literature indicates that the SENCO has had limited, if any, role to play in the development and review of schools’ SEN and inclusion policies (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017; Curran and Boddison 2021; Colum and MacRuaric 2023). Fitzgerald and Radford (2017, p.459) noted that ‘implementation of the school plan on SEN was identified as the least important aspect of the role’. Colum and Mac Ruairc (2023) examined the leadership role of the SENCO in Irish primary schools and outlined the various SENCO responsibilities from this small-scale study and leading, developing, reviewing or implementing SEN

policy was not included in these responsibilities. This may indicate that this strategic task was not viewed by the four SENCOs as important or a component of their leadership role. In England, Curran and Boddison (2021) in their large-scale national survey of SENCOs did not list SEN policy development as a responsibility for the SENCOs and noted that such strategic development is problematic in secondary schools. These authors also recommended that in future the SENCO role should be protected to afford them ‘the necessary status and seniority to influence school policy at strategic level’ (Curran and Boddison 2021, p.46). The findings from this study reveal that SENCOs are actively leading the development, review, and implementation of the school SEN policy at the microsystem level. This may be a reflection of the progression of the SENCO role from one that was largely ‘operational’ with a ‘weighty administrative burden’ (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017, p.464) to one where the SENCOs appear to be adopting a more strategic perspective on their roles. The ability of SENCOs to develop in-house SEND policies is associated with SENCOs having a position on their school’s senior leadership team (Smith and Broomhead 2019). This may provide insight into the reasons to why SENCOs in this study were leading the development of SEN policy within the school’s microsystem.

In Phase One, SENCOs were asked to rate the importance of ‘Leading and developing SEN plan, policies and procedures’ and the mean rating of 1.36 indicates that they viewed this as a ‘very important’ responsibility. Similarly, in Phase Two it emerged that the devising and development of the SEN policy is their responsibility and it is *‘falling to the SENCO’* (P2), which is distributed to them from the Principal and Board of Management. There is evidence in the data that some SENCOs were reviewing and devising SEN policies to align the school’s policies with changes in national policy coming from the exosystem, for instance the implementation of the Continuum of Support (DES 2017a; DES 2017b). Potentially this may be a reflection of changes from the Department of Education (exosystem), which are influenced by wider societal attitudes, political ideologies and international accords related to inclusive practices at the macrosystem level, impacting on the operational strategies within the school’s microsystem.

It emerged from the data that the SENCOs collaborated with members of the school’s microsystem in a distributed manner to devise and review the SEN policy. Some SENCOs commented on including the voice of parents and pupils into the

school's revised SEN policy so that all members of the school's microsystem are included. This is suggestive of the SENCO using agency to develop a more inclusive school-wide SEN policy, while advocating for pupils and parents by ensuring that their voice is integrated into the school's strategic SEN approaches. Clarke and Done (2021) emphasise the importance of advocating for pupils and their needs at a school-wide level to prevent marginalisation and exclusionary practices for pupils with additional needs. Walsh (2020) examined the contribution of SETs in Irish primary schools to leadership of SEN provision and reported similar findings to a degree regarding SEN policy development. In the bigger schools, the SEN coordinator and SEN teams initiated reviews, amended policies and then shared proposed amendments with the entire staff for further discussion before being ratified by the board. However, Walsh (2020) noted the structures and the systems for reviewing and updating policy varied depending on school size with Principals in some small schools assuming the entire responsibility for the SEN policy.

Finally, in one school the SENCO (S2) revealed that she included her SENCO duties and roles and responsibilities in the SEN school policy, which may be viewed as an attempt to formalise her role within her own school microsystem. This SENCO provided insight into her interpretation and conceptualisation of the SENCO role in her microsystem. It could be viewed that this was done due to a lack of policy guidance from the exosystem on the SENCO role. While the inclusion of SENCO roles and responsibilities could be viewed as facilitating this SENCO to enact her role, it is a local interpretation based on this SENCO's microsystem and experiences (Dobson and Douglas 2018). This brings to the fore the need for national policy guidance on the SENCO role from the exosystem, which reflects macrosystem influences such as international discourse, relevant and current research developments and evidence-informed best practice on leadership for inclusive practices within schools. Overall, the SENCOs are leading this important strategic role within schools, which affords them the opportunity to utilise agency as they mediate changes from the exosystem whilst also ensuring that they are advocating for pupils with additional needs.

7.2.2 SENCOs are leading staff and the SET team in SEN provision using school-wide systems

The integration of the findings from both Phase One and Two clearly revealed that the SENCOs are leading staff and the SET team in SEN provision using school-wide collaborative systems. In Phase Two it emerged that this work involved tasks such as establishing collaborative training and meetings, developing school provision plans, coordinating the SET team's strengths to the areas of need, SEN induction training, timetabling and caseload management, and overseeing support files and plans. The findings from Phase One showed that similar key roles and responsibilities had very important to important mean ratings from the SENCOs, for example 'co-ordinating the SEN team' (mean rating: 1.26; 1 = very important) 'collaborating with class teachers' (mean rating: 1.28), 'timetabling SEN support' (rating: 1.32), and 'developing and co-ordinating the Student Support plan process' (mean rating: 1.39). Walsh (2020) reported that SETs in primary schools in Ireland were engaged in similar tasks regarding the co-ordination of SEN provision, which included managing resources for SEN, timetabling, record-keeping, and mentoring and inducting newly qualified teachers and new appointees to the SEN team. Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) also commented that SENCOs are undertaking similar operational roles regarding the coordination of SEN provision. The 2015 SEND Code in England detailed that the purpose of the SENCO role could be viewed as both operationally and strategically overseeing SEN provision for pupils (DfE and DoH 2015). The findings in this study somewhat differ in that the SENCOs were not necessarily 'bogged down' (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017) with just administrative and operational tasks but were instead leading the coordination of staff and the SET team, through school-wide systems and collaborative and distributed approaches, to efficiently engage with these tasks.

The SENCOs undertook this aspect of their role by developing and implementing school-wide collaborative systems. These systems (see Figure 6.5 for all systems) included, for example, scheduled time for collaborative meetings between SET and class teachers, collaborative teaching and team teaching, SET team procedural systems (SET team induction pack), technological communication systems, drop-in systems, and standing items on staff meetings. Fitzgerald and Radford (2020) echoed some of these findings and noted that SENCOs developed school-wide systems, such as SEN being a standing item on staff meetings, to support

collaborative practice and facilitate communication. Findings suggest that the development of these systems by the SENCOs results in more efficient practices and in the staff becoming '*more productive and quicker*' (P3). The SENCOs adopted innovative approaches to the development of the systems with two SENCOs devising SEN induction procedural packs and training for staff, which outlined key procedural processes and templates. Technological approaches were also used by the SENCOs to streamline process, procedures, information-sharing and communication practices. These included the use of Aladdin for record-keeping, development of an '*Aladdin Quick Guide*' (S1) to coordinate this process and support staff, WhatsApp for communication, and a communication system for direct messaging called '*SLACK*' (P1). All of these systems allowed the SENCOs to enhance the collaborative and communicative practices across the schools' microsystem and thus streamline, distribute and reduce the SENCOs' administrative duties. School-wide collaborative systems are imperative in facilitating a coordinated and universal approach across the school microsystem to SEN and in managing administrative duties (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017, 2020). A guiding principle from Hornby's inclusive special education theory emphasises that the development of such systems and procedures is important to optimise engagement and learning for all students (Hornby 2015). It could be suggested that the SENCOs in Phase Two were agentive in establishing school-wide collaborative and communicative systems (microsystem) as they all held posts of responsibility. Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) reported that holding management positions allowed SENCOs to lead SEN through the development of collaborative systems. Interestingly in Phase One, the statistical analysis revealed that there was a significant association between post of responsibility status and systems for collaboration between SETs and class teachers. Specifically, a higher percentage of SENCOs (72.6%) with such a post had these collaborative systems in place compared with SENCOs who did not have a post of responsibility (61.4%). This is further evidence that SENCOs being placed within the leadership and management structures of the school allows them to lead the strategic development of school-wide systems of collaboration to promote inclusive practices and enable colleagues to support pupils with SEN (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017).

The collaborative systems developed and implemented by the SENCOs could be viewed as a social capital based strategy, which creates benefits such as the transfer

and customisation of knowledge and practice for all, thus allowing teachers to learn from each other (Fullan 2011). Essentially the systems were facilitating the development of the schools as ‘learning organisations’ (Silins *et al.* 2002) where ‘collaborative teaching and learning environments’ and ‘initiatives’ were established and where ‘opportunities for continuing professional development’ (for example SEN induction procedural packs and training) were provided (Silins *et al.* 2002). At the heart of professional collaborative practice, such as the collaborative systems developed by the SENCOs in leading staff, is distributed leadership, collective efficacy and professional collaboration (Harris and Jones 2020). The collaborative approach taken by the SENCOs in leading staff and the SET team in the provision of SEN resulted in these SENCOs adopting a distributed model of leadership. The systems developed and enacted by the SENCOs allowed for the distribution of responsibilities across the staff and SET team in the school’s microsystem. This in turn alleviated and streamlined the administrative burden on the SENCOs thus potentially allowing them to act more as advocates for pupils with SEN and strategic leaders for inclusive practices. By establishing the various systems of collaboration, the SENCOs were afforded the opportunity to use these structures to advocate for pupils with additional needs. For example, it could be suggested that having SEN on staff meeting agendas and holding collaborative meetings between staff provided SENCOs with the vehicle to advocate for pupils in need of support and the importance of inclusive special education. In summary, the collaborative approaches adopted by the SENCOs in leading SEN is indicative of a distributed and advocacy approach to leadership harnessing the collective and collaborative efforts of all staff within the school microsystem. This advocacy approach was also reported in New Zealand by Lin *et al.* (2022, p.94) who reported that SENCOs identified as advocates who displayed ‘passion and enthusiasm for standing up and being a voice for SEN students’.

7.2.3 SENCOs are leading the identification of pupils with additional needs

The identification of pupils with additional needs was a significant responsibility for SENCOs in leading SEN provision. In Phase One, the responsibility ‘Identifying pupils with additional needs’ had a mean importance rating of 1.25 (1=very important)

and was the second ranked responsibility of importance for the 371 SENCOs. In Phase Two, the majority of participants indicated that organising and analysing assessments to identify pupils that need additional supports was an integral part of the SENCO's role. SP2 (SENCO Principal) in Phase Two commented that *'leadership in SEN would be identifying the needs of the pupils and developing a programme around those needs'*. This finding has been echoed in research where leading the identification of needs and administration of assessments was reported a key part of the SENCO role in the primary school setting (Agaliotis and Kalyva 2011; Goransson *et al.* 2015; Klang 2017; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023). As an example in Sweden, assessment was identified as one of seven main work areas of SENCOs in Sweden (Klang 2017). There is increased autonomy and responsibility for schools in identifying, managing and allocating additional teaching supports since the introduction of SETAM with very little PLD for teachers and schools (Curtain and Egan 2021). This change in policy from the exosystem level, influenced by political ideologies and beliefs from the macrosystem, had a trickle-down effect on the SENCO's microsystem and altered their SENCO role regarding identification with a greater focus on autonomy. The move to a needs-led approach (SETAM) with increased school autonomy to allocate resources results in SENCOs having increased agentic capacity to make decisions within the microsystem. This potentially provides more opportunities for SENCOs to advocate for pupils that may not have received supports previously but would benefit from these.

In Phase One, the SENCOs used a variety of procedures to identify pupils in need of additional supports and the most commonly used were 'below a set percentile on in-school standardised tests', 'recommendation of class teacher', 'external professional reports', and 'special education teacher's assessment'. Having the knowledge of assessments for identification processes and being able to transfer that knowledge to the SET team was of importance to the schools. Phase Two indicated that SENCOs are responsible for managing the identification of all needs, including care needs of pupils and aligning resources and staff across the microsystem. The data from Phase Two points to the SENCOs adopting a *'pastoral care role'* (P3) when leading the identification of needs and this could be indicative of the SENCOs acting as advocacy leaders. There is a need for SENCOs to act as advocates for young people with SEN and their families in order to minimise marginalisation and exclusion

(Clarke and Done 2021). P3 (Principal) talked about how the SENCO in his school uses a '*pastoral care*' approach and meets with families and professionals to work out '*where the difficulty and problems are and on how we can support that*'. These '*pastoral*' and advocacy approaches were also evident when SENCOs assigned SNAs to children coming in who do not have a diagnosis and would not be able to access the curriculum or remain in the school due to behavioural difficulties. This pastoral care aspect to the SENCO role was reflected in a small-scale interview-based research study with secondary school SENCOs (Burton and Goodman 2011, p.142) who reported that the SENCO role bridges 'educational and pastoral fields with an overall more holistic view of the children and their needs'. The researchers commented that the SENCOs genuinely cared about the students' well-being and 'would go beyond what their job required in order to help meet their needs' (Burton and Goodman 2011, p.142). Aligned to this Holland (2022, p.59) reported that SENCOs often went 'above and beyond designated role expectations' to ensure supports were in place for pupils. This pastoral, caring and advocacy approach reflected in Burton and Goodman's (2011) study was evident in this current work with Irish primary school SENCOs. In conclusion, the findings from Phase Two indicated that the process of identifying pupils' needs and assigning the relevant supports is led by the SENCOs using collaborative systems that can facilitate discussions for both SET and class teachers. The participants indicated that collaboration between staff in the microsystem was essential in the identification, prioritisation and planning for pupils.

7.2.4 SENCOs are leading SEN and school initiatives

Leading and implementing SEN and school initiatives was ranked as the most important SENCO role and responsibility in Phase One (mean rating: 1.22; 1 = very important). This was reflected in the Phase Two findings where it was evident that SENCOs '*lead the initiatives*' (SP1) and have the important role of planning, organising and coordinating the initiatives and programmes that are occurring throughout the school's microsystem. These initiatives implemented by the SENCOs involved the utilisation of inclusive pedagogies, such as various types of co-teaching when using an in-class support model. For example, in Phase One, SENCOs noted that the second most frequently used provision type was 'in-class teaching', which aligns

with Curtin's (2021) research. The SENCO's collaborative approach was also evident here as SENCOs were working with staff to plan and implement these initiatives and inclusive pedagogies and used technology ('SLACK' system used in school G for direct messaging between staff) to communicate collaboratively with staff on these SEN and school-wide initiatives. The SENCOs' work related to the implementation of both SEN initiatives (e.g. 'Talk Boost', S2) and school initiatives (e.g. 'Literacy lift off and Mata sa Rang', S3) and the training of staff on these initiatives illustrates that the SENCO role is evolving and expands across the entire school population and is not focussed solely on pupils with additional needs. This could be reflective of a focus on improving outcomes for all pupils at tier one of the Continuum of Support within the school and the SENCOs leading 'pedagogical practice...to make a real impact on the ways in which their peers understand and enact teaching and learning' (Hallett 2022, p.2). SENCOs as pedagogical leads adopt a role where they are able to lead 'inclusive pedagogies' through a whole-school approach to special education (Hallett 2022). The focus by the SENCOs on the development of inclusive pedagogies empowers them to develop their role in a manner that firmly embeds them in curricular and pedagogical domains (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). In Phase Two it was evident that SENCOs research and present new programmes, such as 'anxiety gremlins' (S2), 'Talk Boost' (S2), 'wellbeing initiatives' (S3), to both the SET and class teachers and provide staff professional learning on these programmes once they are adopted by the teachers. Following this, the SENCOs collaborate with the staff in the school microsystem to implement these programmes and approaches thus embedding them in curricular and pedagogical aspects of school-wide teaching and learning. There is engagement with outside agencies and external professional services at times with these initiatives, which involves the SENCO working at the mesosystem level.

SENCOs are also tasked with the introduction of new initiatives due to policy changes and guidance from the Department of Education at the exosystem level, for example, *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023* (Government of Ireland 2019). These policies are influenced by international discourse, culture and political agendas over time at the macrosystem and chronosystem levels. Within this framework, schools are required to include wellbeing promotion in their School Self-Evaluation (SSE), which should involve the development and implementation of wellbeing promotion in the school microsystem

(Government of Ireland 2019). Policies and agendas such as this are influencing the work of SENCOs at the microsystem level, for example S3 talked about implementing wellbeing initiatives from a whole-school approach as she leads *'the new wellbeing initiatives'*. These exo- and macro-system changes are resulting in SENCOs mediating changes to teachers' practices within their classrooms at the microsystem level, which in turn contributes to the SENCO role portfolio and the accompanying expanding workload.

7.2.5 SENCOs are leading staff development and professional learning within the area of SEN

In both phases of this research it was evident that identifying professional development opportunities, leading staff development and professional learning in SEN and providing professional development to staff was a central responsibility for the SENCO. In Phase One, the SENCOs gave a mean importance rating of 1.89 for the responsibility 'Identifying relevant CPD and providing CPD to staff' which lies between the ratings 'very important' and 'important'. It was evident in Phase Two that SENCOs were leading this area of responsibility and *'leading them (staff) with regard to in service and best practice'* (SP3). This finding aligns to existing research that identifies the provision of staff professional development as a key role for the SENCO (Struyve *et al.* 2018; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023; Walsh 2023). Colum and Mac Ruairc (2023, p.550) commented that SENCOs were providing this staff development through various systems, such as 'after-school hours' and 'Croke Park hours' professional development sessions. Providing staff development to newly qualified teachers and new appointees to the SEN team was reported as a responsibility of SETs by Walsh (2020). This in-school professional learning focussed on areas of need, which were identified by the staff. In England, the SEND Code of Practice identifies that 'the SENCO provides professional guidance to colleagues' as one of the responsibilities that resides with the SENCO (DfE and DoH 2015, p.108). Struyve *et al.* (2018, p.701) asserted that the role of the SENCO can be viewed as not only to support pupils but 'to support and professionalize regular teachers in fulfilling special needs care in their classroom'.

It was evident in Phase Two that the SENCOs were collaboratively leading staff professional development in best practice, policy changes, SEN initiatives, and initiatives in various curricular areas. It could be suggestive that this approach is indicative of the SENCOs 'leading learning' (Hallett and Hallett 2017, p.40) and somewhat acting as 'pedagogical leads' (Hallett 2022) in their school's microsystem. In Phase Two, the data indicated that SENCOs have a dissemination and professional learning role in leading and coordinating knowledge related to changes in practice in schools. It appears that SENCOs are the '*gatekeepers*' (P1) of knowledge who have to interpret policy, circulars, new research developments and then provide professional learning on this to the SET team and whole-school staff. In this process the SENCOs have to decipher what are the important development and knowledge areas for their school context (microsystem) and then deliver the professional learning in a manner where there is discussion and consultation in order to influence and ensure '*genuine buy in*' (P3). This data came from the perspective of a Principal, which shows that the senior leadership has the expectation that SENCOs are responsible for being decisions makers, interpreters and influencers of changing practices within schools (microsystem) stemming from policy changes (exosystem) and for best practice in whole-school teaching and learning approaches. This is a significant responsibility and undertaking without clear policy guidance on the SENCO role from the exosystem level. Essentially SENCOs are leading and mediating changes in practice within their schools and 'leading the development of whole-school culture of best practice' and 'promoting improvements in teaching and learning', both of which have been identified as aspects of learning outcomes in England for the NASENCo (Hallett and Hallett 2017). This is an important role of the SENCO as previous research has revealed that teachers' feel inadequately equipped with the relevant knowledge, experience and supports to identify for complex and diverse learning needs (Curtin 2021).

The SENCOs were 'leading learning' (Hallett and Hallett 2017, p.40) through collaborative, whole-school distributed approaches (Fitzgerald 2022) which contribute to the development of the schools as learning organisations 'where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured' (Senge 1990, p3). Various collaborative systems and approaches, such as drop-in sessions, consultative professional learning sessions, staff meetings, and workshops, were adopted by the SENCOs, which

fostered in-school professional learning communities. The SENCOs were '*offering opportunities where people can collaborate and can have those professional conversations*' (S2). There was evidence in Phase Two of SENCOs using staff meetings as a vehicle for '*sharing information with staff...and sharing different things that work in different classrooms...sharing ideas and sharing what works for different people*' (S2). Kennedy (2005, p.244) noted that 'the added value of learning in communities, viewing the existence of individual knowledge and the combinations of several individuals' knowledge through practice, as a powerful site for the creation of new knowledge'. These approaches by the SENCOs facilitated 'professional dialogue collaboration and knowledge exchange' (OCED 2016, p.10) and involved the SET teams and staff discussing, sharing, reflecting and consulting with each other on new knowledge, information, policy, research and developments. Research has indicated that a process of deep learning and engagement, such as this described above, can result in the successful implementation of new practices or the adoption of new methodologies in schools (King 2014; Raftery 2021).

A particular focus for the SENCOs was the mentoring and coaching of new staff in SEN and '*the newer members of staff*' (P1) who may have limited experience in this area. Here the SENCO supported these new staff through mentorship where they as mentors were more senior to the mentee (new staff), had more experience and adopted a facilitative role (Hallett and Hallett 2017). During this process, the SENCOs observed and checked in on these staff, provided them with support resources (SEN induction procedural packs) and supported them in relation to assessments, planning and team teaching. This aligns with the coaching/ mentoring model of CPD from Kennedy's (2014) spectrum of models of CPD. The defining characteristic of this model 'is the importance of the one-to-one relationship, generally between two teachers, which is designed to support CPD' (Kennedy 2014, p.242).

There was an element of collaboration with external agencies, such as the NCSE and NEPS, to deliver professional learning that met the identified needs of the whole-school staff. The SENCOs sought out and engaged with these agencies to ensure that appropriate and relevant professional learning was provided to all in relation to changes in policy, best practice or new interventions, such as setting up a new special class. Case study research in Denmark found that cross-professional collaboration, such as described above, is central in strengthening inclusive school

developments (Hansen *et al.* 2020). The engagement with the external agencies is a form of collaboration known as ‘the indirect form’ (Hansen *et al.* 2020, p.48) where ‘the specialist works as a consultant, counsellor or tutor helping the teacher and, as a result, works indirectly with the child by working directly with the teacher and his or her practice, which in turn benefits all students’. This form of collaboration uses the specialised knowledge and experience from the external agencies to enhance the development of new strategies within the school microsystem (Hansen *et al.* 2020). While this can be viewed as a positive collaboration and development, there was limited evidence of external agency collaboration at the mesosystem level throughout both Phase One and Two.

7.2.6 Summary

Literature and research regarding the SENCO role highlight the enormous and evolving workload associated with this role. This study has clearly demonstrated that SENCOs are indeed at the heart of the bioecological system and their role is pivotal in advancing the inclusive practices and the inclusive agendas in schools. The findings point to the many responsibilities that reside with the SENCO role and indicated that the SENCOs are leading and managing school-wide collaborative approaches to SEN provision and school-wide initiatives, using inclusive pedagogies, in various subject areas for all pupils. Having established that SENCOs in Ireland are generally part of the SLT, they were viewed by staff as the leaders of SEN provision, ‘*the specialist and Guru*’ (P2), and the ‘*gatekeepers*’ (P1) of knowledge in best practice in schools. The insights gained from both phases of this research point to SENCOs leading through collaborative and distributed approaches, ensuring compliance and accountability to policy, whilst advocating for pupils with additional needs and for an inclusive special education agenda. SENCOs occupy a space where they are balancing the navigation of neo-liberal managerialism and accountability with the need to ensure that the needs of all pupils are being met in an appropriate and optimal manner. There is evidence of the SENCOs acting as advocacy leaders (Clarke and Done 2021), pedagogical leads (Hallett 2022), mediators of change as well as interpreters, influencers, and decision-makers of changing policy, practice and research from the exosystem level. The SENCOs role at the microsystem level is affected and altered

due to changes that are occurring over time at all levels of the bioecological system (Bronfenbrenner 2005) and this was clearly evident in Phase One when 71.6% of SENCOs indicated that their role changed after the introduction of the SETAM (DES 2017a). Finally, contextual factors both enable and inhibit the SENCOs in successfully enacting their role as leaders, mediators of change and influencers and the findings in these areas will be explored in the coming sections.

7.3 What are the perceived enablers to enactment of the SENCO role?

Theme Two: Knowledgeable, connected and experienced SENCOs are enabled by supportive staff and Principals and a culture of collaboration.

The findings from both Phase One and Two identified contextual factors that enabled the SENCO to fulfil their role. In both phases, the SENCOs were asked to identify enablers for SENCO role enactment. Phase Two allowed for a more in-depth discussion around these enablers to gain an understanding as to why these factors positively contributed to the SENCO role. Both phases identified knowledge, experience, a culture of collaboration, supportive staff and Principals together with connectedness with colleagues and communities of practice as enablers of SENCO role enactment. These factors echo existing research in this area (Kugelmass and Ainscow 2004; Griffin *et al.* 2008; Struyve *et al.* 2018; Whalley 2018; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020) and extend our knowledge of the realities of the SENCO role.

7.3.1 Professional learning and knowledge

Professional learning, knowledge, and connectedness were important enablers for SENCOs who commented on the value of experience, third-level qualifications, ongoing professional learning and connectedness through communities of practice in enhancing their confidence and professional capacity to enact the role. These findings align with research, which has illustrated that specific professional learning can enhance SENCO status (Whalley 2018) and develop SENCOs' capacity as advocacy leaders (Done *et al.* 2023). In Phase One, it was evident that 72.3% of SENCOs had postgraduate qualifications, including at Master's and doctoral level. Regarding SEN, 48.7% have SEN specific third-level qualifications of which 30% approximately were

Master's degrees in SEN. The SENCOS highlighted how beneficial these qualifications were to them with P301 (Participant 301) noting that the '*post grad in SEN was a MASSIVE HELP*'. Engagement with these high-level postgraduate programmes by the SENCOS at the mesosystem level, could have potentially enhanced the SENCOS' capacity as advocacy leaders within their school microsystems. These programmes could have developed the SENCOS' research skills, critical literacy capabilities, and theoretical perspectives to interpret policy changes (exosystem) and 'influence SLT thinking' (Done *et al.* 2023, p.203). The SENCOS' knowledge allowed them to be viewed as the '*specialist and Guru*' as well as the '*go to person*' (P2) in schools.

7.3.2 Communities of practice

Best practice professional learning models are those that are 'collaborative and grounded, rather than individual or top down', such as communities of practice (Netolicky 2016, p.271). In these networks, SENCOS move from positions of isolation, to ones that foster connectedness, shared identity, collegiality and empowerment (Fitzgerald 2022) which enables dialogue, stimulates learning and introduces collaborative processes (Cambridge *et al.* 2005). The findings from both phases of the research indicated that involvement with communities of practice (professional learning communities) both within the schools (microsystem) and between schools (mesosystem) were '*invaluable*' (S3, SP3) and '*absolutely spectacular*' (SP3) and were enablers to role enactment. In Phase One, P320 (Participant 320, Phase One) commented that '*I am part of a SET group on FB and without them I would be lost*'. The SENCOS emphasised how these in-school and external communities supported them in their role, allowed them to learn from each other, developed a sense of collegiality and gave them the space to discuss, reflect and connect with each other on best practice and the challenges that they encounter. The data suggested that the various SENCOS' microsystems differ and that by being connected to each other through these communities (mesosystem) they are able to learn from each other and gain relevant knowledge for their own microsystem.

Interestingly, the SENCOS in Phase Two reflected that the communities of practice are beneficial as they are specific to the SENCOS' needs, not imposed on them, are

teacher-led, *'informal'*, and *'it's coming from the group, it's intrinsic'* (SP3). These factors can provide guidance for any future community of practice developments and structure. Such collaborative approaches to professional learning can develop, grow and sustain distributed leadership (OECD 2016) and have the potential to contribute to SENCOs' professional capacity to lead and promote inclusive practices at whole-school level. While the qualitative data overwhelming points to the benefits of these communities of practice, the data from Phase One indicated that only 38.5% of the 371 SENCOs surveyed are actually part of a community of practice. More needs to be done from the exosystem level on developing and nurturing the growth of these communities across the mesosystem.

7.3.3 Experience

Expertise is deemed important for SENCO leadership (Bush 2008; Struyve *et al.* 2018; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020). As discussed previously the SENCOs in both Phase One and Two had extensive teaching experience and had experience as SETs. These factors together with parental/ life experience enabled the SENCOs in their role. The SENCOs across both phases talked about *'on the ground experience'* (P72, Participant 72, Phase 1) and the Principals in Phase Two highlighted the importance of the experience of the SENCO. The Principals insisted that having SET experience was paramount to the SENCOs' connection with the SET teams, and their status and position within the schools. For example, P3 declared *'she has a lot of experience herself, and that experience exudes'*. It could be suggested that this experience is essential for SENCOs to lead and deliver SEN provision and school initiatives using collaborative approaches that connect them with others throughout the school microsystem. Struyve *et al.* (2018) illustrated this point when they noted that SENCOs receive the legitimacy to act as teacher leaders when their expertise is recognised. Having experience enhanced the trust and respect that Principals had in the SENCOs which would have provided the SENCOs with autonomy and agency to lead SEN and the various initiatives. This aligns with Bush (2008) who noted that to develop SENCO leadership status, an authority of expertise was deemed important.

7.3.4 Culture of collaboration and supportive staff

The culture of collaboration and support from staff evident in the schools appeared to enhance the SENCOs connection with colleagues and the development of school-wide collaborative approaches to SEN provision and the implementation of initiatives and interventions throughout the schools. In Phase Two, the findings indicated that colleagues were supportive to the SENCO themselves, the SENCO role and to the collaborative approaches being implemented by the SENCO. S1, indicated ‘*you couldn’t do the job unless you had the support and collaboration behind you, things aren’t going to happen*’. In school B, the SENCO illustrated that staff support was crucial when their new role commenced as the supportive staff shared knowledge of best practices, which in turn gave them confidence in the role. This finding was also evident in Phase One where the participants spoke of working with experienced colleagues and ‘*learning from previous SENCOs in the school who were...willing to share knowledge*’.

The SENCOs outlined that scheduled meetings and the school-wide collaborative approaches that they adopted were met with enthusiasm from staff as they provided opportunities to problem pose, problem solve, discuss and consult. Therefore, it could be suggested that this contributed to the creation of in-school professional learning communities and the school as a learning organisation (Senge 1990; Kennedy 2005, 2014). Data from Phase Two suggests that the collaborative approaches and a willingness to share information fostered trust, collegiality, and good working relationships. Interestingly this culture of collaboration empowered staff and the SENCO ‘*to take on new initiatives and to try this out and to work in teams*’ (P2). Mora-Ruano *et al.* (2019) commented that collaboration is a driver that can positively influence the entire school community, as is evident in the data described above. The SENCO in school C spoke of how the collaborative sharing of ideas and knowledge helped her as a SENCO to drive and implement tasks associated with her role. The Principal in school I declared that this culture of collaboration is more evident in recent times and these changes in culture are being facilitated through the SENCO’s leadership. This increase in the culture of collaboration at the microsystem level is reflective of policy changes happening at the exosystem level, such as *The Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* (DES 2016) and SETAM (DES 2017a, 2017b). Overall the culture of collaboration that existed within the schools facilitated the SENCO to enact

their role and lead the provision of SEN and various initiatives and was a ‘powerful tool for the implementation of effective inclusive practice’ (Mulholland and O’Connor 2016, p.1079).

7.3.5 Supportive Principals

Research literature relating to the SENCO role speaks of a supportive Principal being essential to successful enactment of the role (Riehl 2000; Cole 2005; Leithwood and Riehl 2005; Ainscow and Sandhill 2010; Fitzgerald 2015; Lin *et al.* 2022). All of the Principals interviewed who were not also fulfilling SENCO roles supported the SENCOs through various means such as, reducing tasks and workload, sharing decision-making (co-leadership), and facilitating professional learning. The Principal in school G spoke of her supportive working relationship with her SENCO, which involved trust and an appreciation of her capabilities. All the Principals shared that they were aware of the enormity of the SENCO role and that they supported their SENCO by sharing tasks and relieving the SENCO of some tasks and approaching it as a team. It is interesting to think that the reason that posts of responsibility were created was to assist the Principal with their heavy workload, but here the opposite appears to be the case.

There is evidence that the SENCOs were involved in decision-making, had autonomy, were facilitated and supported by Principals and management to take creative and innovative approaches and were trusted in this process. The role of the Principal is critical for effective collaboration to occur as they must ‘encourage, engage and empower teachers in the collaborative quest’ (Hargreaves 2019, p.16) and is a key driver in cultivating inclusive cultures (O’Gorman and Drudy 2011; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020). Principals and SENCOs were engaged in shared decision-making on a number of operational and strategic areas related to provision in the schools. The Principals indicated, while there was shared decision-making, the SENCOs are very much leading this process and come with the ideas and solutions. In this case, the Principals were essentially directed by the SENCOs’ expert knowledge.

In school E, the SENCO Principal revealed that staff supported his role by taking on responsibility for aspects of the SENCO role. The sharing of responsibility was helpful and necessary due to the extensive workload of being both a Principal and

SENCO. This is reflective of distributed leadership, which is essential to enable meaningful inclusion in schools (Morrissey 2021) and is an ‘indispensable component of inclusive education’ (Miskolci *et al.* 2016, p.53). This leadership approach provided the SENCO with agency and autonomy (Morrissey, 2021), relates to organisational growth (Harris and Jones, 2020) and enhances the SENCOs’ ability ‘to effect positive change and innovation at whole-school level’ (Fitzgerald, 2022, p.63). In Phase One P163 (Participant 163) commented that the ‘*climate of collaboration that exists in the school which has been fostered and enabled by the Principal*’ facilitated them in their role enactment. This collaborative culture, fostered by the Principals’ leadership, enabled the SENCOs to develop relationships of trust, support, solidarity, professional dialogue, and collective responsibility (Hargreaves and O’Connor 2018) to effect positive outcomes within the school’s microsystem.

7.3.6 Summary

Both phases of the PhD provided insight into the contextual factors that facilitated the SENCO to lead and manage SEN provision and school-wide initiatives. These factors contributed to enhancing the impact of the SENCO’s leadership of inclusive practices across the school microsystem. This study has revealed that knowledge and expertise supports the SENCO to build connections in every facet of the microsystem and mesosystem. A collaborative culture created by a supportive Principal and staff facilitated the fostering of connections with pupils, parents, teachers, support staff, Principals, management teams, professional learning institutions, communities of practice and external agencies (if available to that school). Communities of practice were identified as particularly valuable for SENCOs as they created the space for SENCOs from different microsystems to collaborate, reflect, discuss, consult and connect with each other. There is a need for policy and practice to recognise the important role that such communities can play in supporting SENCOs and thus each individual school microsystem. Notwithstanding these enablers, challenges do exist for the SENCO role and this research has revealed a number of barriers to SENCO role enactment, which are discussed in the following section.

7.4 What are the perceived barriers to enactment of the SENCO role?

Theme Three: The extensive nebulous nature of the SENCO role has evolved in a policy vacuum with insufficient time and inadequate support from external professional services.

The barriers reported in this study are reflective of SENCO barriers previously documented in the literature and relate to the extensive, nebulous nature of the role married with a lack of time, inadequate support from external professional services and ambiguous and limited policy guidance. These barriers overwhelmingly emerged as considerable inhibitors to SENCO role enactment in both phases of this research. The following sub-sections will elaborate on the findings with reference to relevant literature.

7.4.1 Ambiguous and limited policy guidance: SENCOs working in a policy vacuum

The SENCO role is inhibited by ambiguous and limited policy guidance. Essentially SENCOs are operating within a policy vacuum, which adds to the nebulous nature of the SENCO role. This was evident both in Phase One and Two and this lack of policy results in a lack of role clarity and recognition, lack of guidance on training for the SENCO role and a lack of relevant resources and staffing from the Department of Education (exosystem). This barrier was illustrated in Phase One when P245 (Participant 245) commented '*An outdated policy, not having an official title, being told to lead SEN but with no official post of responsibility added or guidance given*'. These findings have been reflected in previous research. Colum and Mac Ruairc (2023) in their qualitative study with primary SENCOs in Ireland reported that the SENCO position is not defined, formalised or mandated. The absence of a role description and job clarity from the exosystem coupled with insufficient training, and resource and staffing allocations, impacts directly on the workload of the SENCO and the complexities of the role at the microsystem level.

There have been policy changes from the exosystem, e.g. SETAM (2017a, 2017b, 2024), regarding the provision of SEN within the school's microsystem which have significantly brought about changes in practice for Principals, SENCOs and staff.

These changes have significantly impacted on the SENCO role (71.6% of SENCOs indicated that role changed due to SETAM, Phase One) due to the increased autonomy which has resulted in increased responsibility, bureaucracy and workload. This has presented challenges to the SENCO and is further complicated by the lack of any guidance in these policy changes on the role, position and recognition of the SENCO. In school A, the SENCO indicated that a challenge for her is trying to decipher the ambiguous policy about what is expected and what she needs to do to ensure compliance with these policies. This is another example of the neo-liberal managerialism and accountability agendas from the exosystem impacting on the SENCO role. As no formal designation of the SENCO role exists, there are many various interpretations of the role (O’Gorman and Drudy 2011). This was evident in Phase Two when SENCOs talked about the variations in practice between schools in relation to teacher’s coordination and liaison time. Without clarity from the exosystem, regarding planning time and SENCO administration time these local variations and challenges for the SENCOs will continue to prevail. Interestingly, SENCOs concur that the ever-changing landscape regarding educational policy in Ireland from the exosystem results in ‘*an awful lot of change in the role*’ for the SENCO. This flux in the system presents another challenge to the SENCOs where they have to continuously grapple with the role as they mediate changes without any formal direction or guidance in relation to this. In this situation where ‘harmful ideological shifts’ prevail due to policy turbulence, these can become insurmountable for SENCOs unless they ‘break free from the atheoretical bubble in which many are trapped (Hallett 2022, p.10). This further highlights the important role that professional learning can play in facilitating the SENCO role and developing SENCOs’ critical literacies, research skills, and theoretical perspectives (Hallett 2022; Done *et al.* 2023). These qualities are imperative to challenge neo-liberal agendas and to develop the SENCOs’ capacity to act as advocacy leaders to minimise discriminatory and exclusionary practices that disproportionately affect pupils with SEN and/ or disabilities (Done *et al.* 2023).

Looking forward this lack of policy related to the SENCO role will remain topical as the recent policy guidance from the NCSE (2024), *An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society*, on the future of the education system in Ireland makes no reference to the SENCO and does not acknowledge its’ existence. Essentially this is again a reflection of the lack of formal recognition of the role in policy documents and

guidance from the exosystem level. To overcome this situation and to alleviate the challenges faced by SENCOs, there is a need to define, recognise and mandate the role, together with enhanced resource provision and formalised positioning of the role within senior leadership structures (O’Gorman and Drudy 2011; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020; Lin *et al.* 2022). This recommendation has been evident in research for well over a decade. As far back as 2011, O’Gorman and Drudy recommended that all schools should have a special needs advisor role on the management team to coordinate SEN provision in schools and that the training for teachers working in special education should include leadership, collaboration and teamwork skills (O’Gorman and Drudy 2011). As these recommendations are not being addressed in government policy, it could be a reason why SENCOs are being called to create their own role from the ground up (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017; Hallett 2022) while navigating the ambiguous policy landscape as they advocate for pupils with additional needs.

7.4.2 Multiple roles and responsibilities and extensive workload

Both phases of this research clearly indicated that holding multiple roles and having numerous responsibilities contributes to the enormity of the SENCO role, which in turn acts as a barrier for the SENCO. Phase One showed that there was only one SENCO out of 371 who was a full-time SENCO and of the 72.8% of SENCOs who held a post of responsibility, only 17% of these had a full post of responsibility related to the coordination of SEN. For the majority of SENCOs they held multiple roles, such as SET and SENCO; Principal and SENCO; Deputy Principal and SENCO; SET, SENCO and Deputy Principal; Deputy Principal, Special Class Teacher and SENCO etc. In addition, the SENCOs talked about the challenge of holding multiple responsibilities within their post of responsibility. In Phase One, P205 (Participant 205) commented that a barrier to role enactment was *‘my own SEN caseload plus other AP1 duty...overseeing whole-school Maths’* and P324 insisted that they had *‘too many responsibilities in AP1 post, as well as working as SET while also working as SENCO’*. It is well documented in the literature that too much work is a continuous barrier to role enactment (Takala *et al.* 2009; Curran and Boddison 2021; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023) which leaves reduced time for the SENCO to focus on strategic

planning of SEN practices and policies within the school microsystem. This situation where the SENCO role is combined with other duties and responsibilities is also reflective of the status quo in England (Rosen-Webb 2011; Curran and Boddison 2021). Rosen-Webb (2011) suggested that the SENCO role is given typically with other roles, such as deputy head teacher or class/ subject teacher. Curran and Boddison (2021) in their large-scale national survey reported that 48% of primary school SENCOs have teaching responsibilities alongside their SENCO role. In addition to teaching responsibilities, the majority of the primary SENCOs concurrently held various responsibilities, such as safeguarding lead and English as an additional language.

Both phases of this research indicate that the SENCOs are supporting many facets of the school's microsystem while interacting with all other systems too, extending all the way out to the macrosystem. Apart from the coordination of SEN, there are a breadth of responsibilities that the SENCOs hold within their post of responsibilities. These include leading strategic school development and implementation plans, such as the DEIS plan and leading the SSE process, as well as curricular areas, such as Maths, English and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). These vast and significant roles contribute to the extensive workload of the SENCO, which was acknowledged by the Principals in Phase Two who commented *'the role is enormous'* and *'I just don't know how the SENCO does it'*. This enormity of the role combined with the strategic leadership responsibility potentially threatens the sustainability of the role in the long term and may contribute to SENCOs not remaining in the role.

7.4.3 Insufficient time

Resulting from the multiple roles and extensive workload of the SENCOs, together with a lack of policy guidance, insufficient time emerged as a barrier to SENCO role enactment across both phases. In Phase One, more than two-thirds of SENCOs emphasised that a lack of time was a major barrier to role enactment and this is echoed in the national and international research (Takala *et al.* 2009; Whalley 2018; Smith and Broomhead 2019; Curran and Boddison 2021; Fitzgerald and Radford 2020; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023). Specifically, SENCOs commented that they had

insufficient time for planning, collaboration, and administration, and their extensive workload was contributing to this. This is reflective of the lack of policy guidance related to designated time for SENCO duties and the increasing neo-liberal managerialism and accountability agendas (exosystem) due to the implementation of SETAM, which grants greater autonomy to schools. The administrative and bureaucratic workloads have increased due to the need to evidence the ‘value-added’ aspect of additional resource allocations for transparency and accountability (Fitzgerald and Radford 2020; Doyle 2021; Walsh 2021; Hallett 2022).

In Phase Two, Principals and SENCOs highlighted that due to this barrier, the SENCO duties were often completed ‘*outside of school hours and none of it is during school time*’ (S3) and that ‘*my evenings seem to be taken up with the SENCO role*’ (S3). Participant 165 (Phase One) commented that their workload is ‘*endless*’ and ‘*I work at least a 60 hour week and I am paid for 30*’, which epitomises the enormity of the role, lack of role clarity and the completion of the various duties outside of school time. According to Principals, the SENCOs are completing the multi-faceted aspects of their role in their own personal time and this ‘*impacts so much on the person’s (SENCO’s) life*’ (P2). This Principal emphasised that the SENCO fulfilling their duties at home or in their personal time is ‘*not sustainable either*’ and they ‘*should have release time*’. This is clear indication that there is a need for policy guidance from the exosystem. Without dedicated time for SENCO duties and this policy guidance from the exosystem level, this unsustainable practice will continue. Ireland is not alone in the need for policy guidance related to designated time. Curran and Boddison (2021, p.46) noted that in future policy and practice in England, there should be ‘protected time’ for SENCOs to ‘effectively manage the demands of the role’.

7.4.4 Inadequate external professional services leads to a fragmentation of support

Effective collaboration and engagement with external professional services is paramount for the realisation of inclusive agendas and SEN provision (Drudy and Kinsella, 2009; Hornby 2015). Research has identified that liaising with external agencies is one of the most important roles of the SENCO (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023). A central principle of Hornby’s (2015) inclusive

special education model is engagement and collaboration with external professional services and agencies, such as NEPS Psychologists, SENO, the NCSE Support Service, the Inspectorate, HSE and allied health professionals. It is imperative that appropriate collaboration with these agencies is fostered and developed to enable the SENCO to lead provision for pupils with SEN and to provide access to a continuum of support for children. The findings from Phase One and Two overwhelmingly point to limited and inadequate support for pupils from external professional services with extensive and lengthy waiting lists. This crisis is reflected in the recent revision of the SETAM (DE 2024) where ‘complex needs’ has been removed as a profiling metric because the DE cannot reliably identify who in the system has such a complex need due to inaccurate and inconsistent data from the HSE Children Disability Network Teams (DE 2024). SENCOs talked about the inability to access support for students and the subsequent difficulty in managing the SEN needs, which added to a sense of frustration. SENCOs and support staff feel unsupported and isolated (‘*you feel like you are on your own*’, S1) and ‘*schools are very much alone at the moment*’ (SP2). This is due to the inadequate and often non-existent support from external agencies. The feelings of SENCOs are epitomised by P189 (Participant 189, Phase One) who commented ‘*meeting a brick wall when dealing with external agencies and the absolute absence of any real support and help for our SEN children*’. These findings are mirrored in research (Abbott 2007; Holland 2022) and limit the SENCOs’ ability to advocate for such pupils and minimise marginalisation and exclusion within the education system.

From a theoretical perspective, SENCOs should be actively collaborating on a regular basis with these external professional services (agencies) in the mesosystem. However, the lack of engagement with these professional services indicated in the findings would suggest that the mesosystem is empty. Essentially these external professional services reside in the exosystem out of reach of the SENCOs, schools, pupils and parents. In Phase Two, Principals and SENCOs reported that they are ‘*trying to tape up*’ (S2) as best they can with some schools privately paying to bring in professional services to support pupils and staff. The lack of appropriate engagement and support from external agencies in the mesosystem, considerably impacts the SENCO role. In the absence of appropriate support and communication from external agencies, SENCOs are filling this communication void and consulting

as best they can with parents and families. Schools have opened special classes, which the SENCOs have to lead and manage, in response to guidance from the exosystem, but have been left without resources and professional supports to support the pupils in their care. The time-consuming work needed to apply for services to support both pupils and staff, has substantially increased the administrative workload for SENCOs. Finally, SENCOs now more than ever must act as advocates for these pupils who require support from external professional services to ensure that they are not marginalised or excluded from the education system (Clarke and Done 2021). This further highlights the importance of appropriate professional learning designed to increase SENCOs' critical literacy, research skills and theoretical perspectives to equip them to challenge the status quo (Hallett 2022; Done *et al.* 2023).

7.4.5 Summary

There was substantial commonality across schools, participants (Principals and SENCOs) and across both phases of this research, which pointed to the challenges that SENCOs face as they enact their role. Operating in a policy vacuum adds to the nebulous nature of the role for the SENCOs. They are working in a space without policy to specify what the role entails and a lack of external professional supports to guide them. The engagements with these external agencies are essentially non-existent as the mesosystem is empty with the agencies residing in the exosystem. These factors together with the multi-faceted nature of the SENCO role contributed to the enormity of this role and the lack of sufficient time for SENCOs to enact their role. Future directions for the SENCO role should consider how these barriers can be overcome for the SENCO to allow them to lead and manage and ensure that pupils are not marginalised or excluded. The next section will discuss Principals' and SENCOs' insights into the future directions of the role.

7.5 What are the professional learning needs of SENCOs and supports needed to allow them to effectively enact their role?

Theme Four: Principals' and SENCOs' insights into future directions of the role.

In this section, the findings pertaining to the Principals' and SENCO's insights in the future directions of the SENCO role are discussed with reference to the literature and theoretical framework.

7.5.1 Official specific guidance at policy level needed on the SENCO role

The findings from Phase Two point to the need for guidance and policy from the exosystem in relation to the SENCO role. The insights from the Principals and SENCOs spoke of the need for unambiguous guidelines and greater clarity on the SENCO role. The participants indicated that this guidance was needed to define the role and outline what the duties of the role should be and '*what we are supposed to be doing*' (S2). It could be inferred that if this direction from the exosystem was provided for the SENCO role it may streamline the SENCO responsibilities and thus reduce their workload. This was further emphasised when the Principals spoke of the need for the identification and prioritisation of SENCOs' responsibilities. If this were to happen, it could contribute to a certain degree in overcoming the barrier regarding the extensive and nebulous nature of the SENCO role.

The findings in Phase Two also point to the mandatory placement of SENCOs within the leadership structures of the schools and the assignment of a mandatory post of responsibility for the SENCO role. This would afford all SENCOs in Irish primary schools the opportunity to further influence school-wide inclusive practices and policies across the school microsystem. Research has indicated that SENCOs need to have a position on the school leadership team or have a place within the management structures to advance school-wide inclusive values, practices and cultures (Layton 2005; Travers 2010; O'Gorman and Drudy 2011; Ware *et al.* 2011; Tissot 2013; Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017). This has been echoed in recommendations from Curran and Boddison (2021, p.46) who suggested that head teachers need to consider how they structure and protect the SENCO role 'to afford the SENCO the necessary status and seniority to influence school policy at strategic level'. Of interest, in Phase Two both Principals and SENCOs asserted that '*mandated continuous professional*

development’ (SP3) should be incorporated into any policy to support SENCOs in their role.

In January 2024, the NCSE published their policy advice paper on special schools and classes entitled *An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society*. This advice paper provides recommendations on ‘future educational provision for students in special schools and classes and to make recommendations on the provision required to enable them to achieve better outcomes’ (NCSE 2024, p.4). This policy advice provides recommendations on the inclusive practices that should be adopted in the Irish education system. While various recommendations are made, no reference is made to the SENCO role and no implications are highlighted on what the proposed recommendations would mean for the SENCO role. Similarly, the revised SETAM (DE 2024) contains no reference to the SENCO role or the impact of the new profiling changes on roles and responsibilities of the SENCO. It is as if it does not exist. Reference is made to principals, school leaders, teachers and school staff but there is ambiguity on whether or not these school leaders include the SENCO. Future policy should reflect on the insights garnered through this research on the SENCO role from the perspective of both SENCOs and Principals.

7.5.2 There is a need for further professional learning specific to the SENCO role

Throughout both phases, it is apparent that there is an overwhelming desire from both SENCOs and Principals for professional learning specific to the SENCO role. In Phase One, 74.9% of SENCOs agreed that there was a need for a SENCO specific postgraduate programme. When asked to list the importance of 26 potential components of a postgraduate programme for SENCOs the mean importance rating was between 1 and 2, which aligns with the ratings ‘very important’ and ‘important’ respectively. This is reflective again of the enormity of the SENCO role but also the associated learning needs of SENCOs. The components that were rated important included not only SEN specific components, but areas of study related to leadership, theoretical perspectives, inclusive policies, the law and SEN as well as contemporary issues in inclusive and special education.

These findings align with research by O’Gorman and Drudy (2011) when they indicated that there was an urgent need for professional development in schools.

Specifically, they emphasised that the key promoters in the school should have the ability to adapt and improve instruction and to keep in line with policy change. O’Gorman and Drudy (2011) in their large-scale research, identified the need for all SEN teachers to be trained in leadership, teamwork and collaboration as it was more than likely that SEN teachers would manage SEN provision in the school. They recommended that a special needs advisor (akin to SENCO) be established that had the capacity to coordinate SEN in schools. The advisor (SENCO) could act as a consultant for the school community, within a management role, which would have implications on their learning need (O’Gorman and Drudy 2011). Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) also recommended that SENCOs should undergo specific training regarding special education and leadership to support a school-wide, universal approach while also having the skills, knowledge and competencies in special education to support the needs of children with distinct and unique needs. The findings suggest that in order to lead a SEN approach that is universal, having specialist knowledge is essential, but the ability to develop collaborative approaches to teaching and learning, the ability to lead professional development initiatives and to develop competency in leading change are also important (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). Aligned to this, in Phase One of this study ‘Leadership and management in education’ had a significantly higher importance percentage rating for SENCOs with a post of responsibility, compared to those without such a post. The experienced gained by those with a post may have highlighted to them the importance that knowledge in leadership plays in allowing the SENCO to act as strategic leaders and mediators of change.

In Phase Two, the SENCOs and Principals concurred that there was a need for professional learning specific to the SENCO role and felt that there is *‘definitely a need for some type of a course for SENCO duties, definitely’* (P2). Done et al. (2023) indicate that there is a need for a university-based Master’s level course, such as the NASENCo, to develop SENCOs’ critical, analytical and research skills, thus enhancing their capacity as advocacy leaders. The participants of Phase Two provided direction on what this course should entail and included aspects such as leadership, evidence-informed practices, new initiatives and research, and the logistics of the SENCO role. The Principals also indicated that the course should involve practical elements where the SENCOs work with SENCOs in other schools to observe, consult,

collaborate and learn from each other, akin to a professional learning community. O' Gorman and Drudy (2011) in their study explored the options for provision of SEN related courses. It was found that teachers attending a college or university on block release was most popular but interestingly teachers and Principals also reported that collegial discussions, networking and gaining practical experience were effective ways in developing their skills. In Phase One, the SENCOs identified that the preferred type of professional learning included relevant day release courses, communities of practice, NCSE school-based support, block release to attend a university programme and the opportunity to observe an experienced colleague.

O'Sullivan *et al.* (2012) conducted research in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and found that the most common forms of professional development were in-service courses, workshops, and education conferences, yet they rated these as being less impactful on their professional practice than collaborative research and approaches. The impact of once-off short duration professional learning such as 'a day release course', which had the highest percentage preference of the SENCOs in Phase One, is questionable, especially if there are no system in place to cascade the learning in the schools. In Phase Two, however, the SENCOs did indicate that the insights gained from courses such as these are shared amongst the staff through various systems, such as drop in sessions before school, Croke Park hours, WhatsApp groups and staff meetings. Short-term professional learning courses and attending seminars can help SENCOs learn about new development but do not provide them with expertise and the necessary authority to work with and guide their colleagues (Agaliotis and Kalyva 2011; Crowther *et al.* 2021). McElearney *et al.* (2018) in their large-scale survey based study, investigating how primary school teachers in Northern Ireland accessed professional development, found that teachers most often engaged in courses, workshops and conferences, which lacked association in research with improving practice and student outcomes. The preferred approaches to professional development were collaborative (group work, cluster groups, coaching and mentoring and activity-based sessions) and interactive (reflective, collegial discussion and use of case study example) but only a minority of teachers engaged in these forms (McElearney *et al.* 2018). A process of deep learning and engagement with professional learning is needed to successfully adopt and implement new practices and methodologies in schools (King 2014; Raftery 2021). Brennan *et al.* (2021)

recommends that professional learning communities should become a central feature in whole-school practice in Ireland as these innovative collaborations can significantly contribute to develop inclusive schools. These communities have the potential to connect SENCOs together in a collaborative setting where they can observe, consult, discuss and learn from each other in a manner that develops their capacities as strategic leaders. It is a viable format for professional learning for SENCOs and in Phase One 65.2% of the SENCOs indicated that it was a preferred type of teacher professional learning.

7.5.3 SENCOs should have dedicated non-contact time to facilitate them in executing the role

This study found that all Principals and SENCOs agreed that dedicated non-contact teaching time would assist the SENCO to fulfil the SENCO's responsibilities and duties. Participants indicated that this could include '*release days at specific times of the year... like the principal release days*' (S3) or '*seriously reduced hours*' (P1). Without non-contact time during the school day the participants spoke of the difficulty in collaborating across the microsystem with staff and also the mesosystem, with external agencies. It has been evidenced in the literature that when there is not enough time for teacher collaboration and that this acts as a barrier to inclusive practices (Brennan *et al.* 2021). Brennan and King (2022) maintain that this is partly due the lack of dedicated non-teaching time within schools. While the SETAM Guidelines (DES 2017b, p.18) outline that there should be time for coordinating planning and reviewing activities, this 'coordination time should, however, be kept to a minimum in order to ensure that teaching time is maximised'. This emphasises the importance of SENCOs having non-contact time to facilitate collaboration at the microsystem and mesosystem level. Having mandatory non-contact time was suggested by Travers *et al.* (2010) to overcome this barrier. There are elements of this evident in Phase Two as schools spoke of using scheduled non-contact time during the school day (Friday afternoons) to enable collaboration between SET teachers and class teachers.

In England, there is provision in their SENCO Code of Practice for mandated time for SENCO duties (DfE and DoH 2015). The amount of time varies as the Code just refers to the term 'sufficient time' (DfE and DoH 2015), which can be somewhat

ambiguous. Curran and Boddison (2021) indicated that the most common amount of allocated time for primary SENCOs was 0.5 – 1 day per week (19%). Despite having allocated time 70% of these SENCOs felt that they do not have enough time to fulfil their role, which further illustrates the importance of having specified designated non-contact time for SENCO duties.

7.5.4 External professional services and agencies need to become accessible and available to collaboratively work and support SENCOs

Evidence from this study highlights that SENCOs and Principals need external professional services to support them in areas, which are extremely limited currently, such as: receiving information and advice; undertaking assessments in a timely manner; facilitating and engaging in intervention and therapy; and implementing a multi-disciplinary team approach for planning for pupils in need. All the participants spoke of the inadequacies in the services provided by external agencies and SP3 spoke of the need for multi-agency and school collaborations to take place in order for the SENCO to achieve better outcomes for pupils. This SENCO Principal also spoke of the need for a more coordinated approach with the SENCO role and external professionals, such as Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists.

In both phases of this research, the external professionals were so out of reach of the schools that they were operating in the exosystem. They need to be at least operating in the mesosystem or even within the microsystem, which would allow for the facilitation of support and collaborations between the schools and external professional services and agencies in a more embedded manner. This coordinated approach to collaboration with external professionals is reflected in the NCSE 2024 policy advice paper on inclusive education where reference is made to the roll-out of the School Inclusion Model (SIM) and the development ‘of a co-professional educational model to provide a coordinated approach and wrap-around supports’ (NCSE 2024, p.16). The NCSE purport that such an approach ‘will facilitate strong working relationships between schools and supporting professionals to bring about the best possible outcomes for students’ (NCSE 2024, p.16). Research commissioned by the NCSE, to evaluate the pilot roll-out of the In-School Therapy School Demonstration Project under the SIM (DES 2020), showed that teachers engaging

with in-school therapists enhanced their knowledge and strategies which allowed them to better identify needs and develop beneficial interactions with pupils (Lynch *et al.* 2020).

Currently, the DES (2017b) encourage and recommend engagement and collaboration with external agencies, such as NEPS Psychologists, SENO, the NCSE Support Service, the Inspectorate, HSE and allied health professionals. The DES (2017b) indicated that it is vital that schools have established procedures for collaborating and communicating with the various external bodies to enhance the quality of the provision provided to pupils with SEN. However, as evident in this research, this engagement and collaboration is fragmented and problematic in primary schools in Ireland.

Engagement with external agencies is central to Hornby's theory of inclusive special education (Hornby 2015). Hornby's theory within the Irish context, is somewhat misaligned as access to therapeutic services in Ireland is limited, due to extensive waiting lists and the lack of collaboration between schools and external agencies (NCSE 2014; Kenny *et al.* 2020; Concannon 2022; Holland 2022). According to Fitzgerald *et al.* (2021), schools are working to provide a cohesive framework for evidence-based interventions across the Continuum of Support, which is a key principle of Hornby's model, but in practice they are not always aligned and access to tier three therapeutic interventions is significantly limited.

7.5.5 Summary

The experiences of the SENCOs and the insights of the Principals provide direction on the future of the SENCO role. These include such things as the need for SENCO specific professional learning, role clarity and recognition from the Department of Education (exosystem), need for dedicated non-contact time and enhanced support from external professional services. These findings can provide guidance on recommendations for policy and practice and these are outlined in the following chapter.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented an integration and interpretation of the Phase One and Two findings in order to contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of SENCOs. This was done in the context of the relevant literature and framed within Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory. It was evident that SENCOs adopt positional leadership roles in their school's microsystem and are leading the provision of SEN and school-wide initiatives using collaborative and distributed approaches. SENCOs are doing this while navigating accountability agendas stemming from the exosystem and simultaneously advocating for pupils with additional needs. The work of the SENCO across the curricular and pedagogical domains points to the SENCOs as 'pedagogical leads' within their school's microsystem (Hallett 2022). Various contextual factors enable the SENCO in their role, chief of which is the culture of collaboration enhanced by leadership that exists across the microsystems. Notwithstanding this, barriers were evident that acted as challenges for SENCO role enactment and included such things as ambiguous policy guidance and inadequate external professional supports. These passionate and committed SENCOs highlighted insights into how the SENCO role could be supported and developed in the future. There is a need for professional learning specific to the SENCO, clear policy guidance, SENCO role clarity and recognition as well as enhanced supports from the professional services. Policy guidance and recognition of the SENCO role from the exosystem level would have a cascading effect across the entire bioecological system and enhance the impact that SENCOs can play in advancing inclusive practices, values, agendas and cultures within their microsystem.

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory holds the SENCO at the centre of the system. The SENCOs are nestled within a series of inter-related systems. The findings point to an active and busy microsystem with continuous engagement and collaboration between all key members with the microsystem. These include, for example, the SENCO, SETs, class teachers, pupils, parents, Principals, Deputy Principals, SNAs, and the Board of Management. The culture of collaboration and the support from staff and Principals evident across both phases of this research is clear illustration of how the microsystem supports the SENCO in their role. Over the past number of years, various policy documents and guidance, such as SETAM (DES 2017a, 2017b) related to SEN and inclusion have come from the Department of

Education at the exosystem level. These policy documents have been influenced by international inclusion discourse and political and societal attitudes and ideologies over time, which operate at the macrosystem and chronosystem level. The changes in practice that stem from these systems have directly impacted on the role of the SENCO in their microsystem. For example, SETAM affords the schools greater autonomy and this has increased the workload of SENCOs. Potentially the profiling of schools through standardised tests that are part of SETAM process, involve the SENCO having to navigate accountability agendas whilst advocating for pupils with SEN.

The greatest challenge for the SENCOs relates to the lack of activity within the mesosystem, which looks at the relationships between different settings and microsystems (Bronfenbrenner 2005). The SENCOs highlighted the value of professional learning communities, such as SENCO Forum, to their role and there was evidence that the SENCOs are actively engaging, consulting, sharing, collaborating, learning and discussing with other SENCOs from different microsystems in these PLCs. SENCOs are also engaging with professional learning institutions, such as universities, to complete formal professional learning in the mesosystem. The knowledge and experience gained from PLCs and professional learning institutions in the mesosystem allow the SENCO to cascade and transfer this knowledge across their school microsystem thus influencing practice and provision. Apart from these activities, it was clear that the mesosystem is thinly populated. Collaboration with external professional services is imperative to an inclusive agenda yet these services can be viewed as residing within the exosystem, out of reach of the SENCOs. This poses a significant challenge for the SENCOs and can potentially contribute to the marginalisation and exclusion of pupils with additional needs. There is a need for these services to move not only into the mesosystem but potentially be embedded firmly within the microsystem of the school to improve and maximise outcomes for pupils with additional needs. Finally, in Figure 7.1 a graphical illustration of the various systems as evident in the findings from Phase One and Two of this research is provided. In this graphic the external professional services are shown to reside in the macrosystem well out of reach of the SENCO, pupils, parents, class teachers, SETs and Principals.

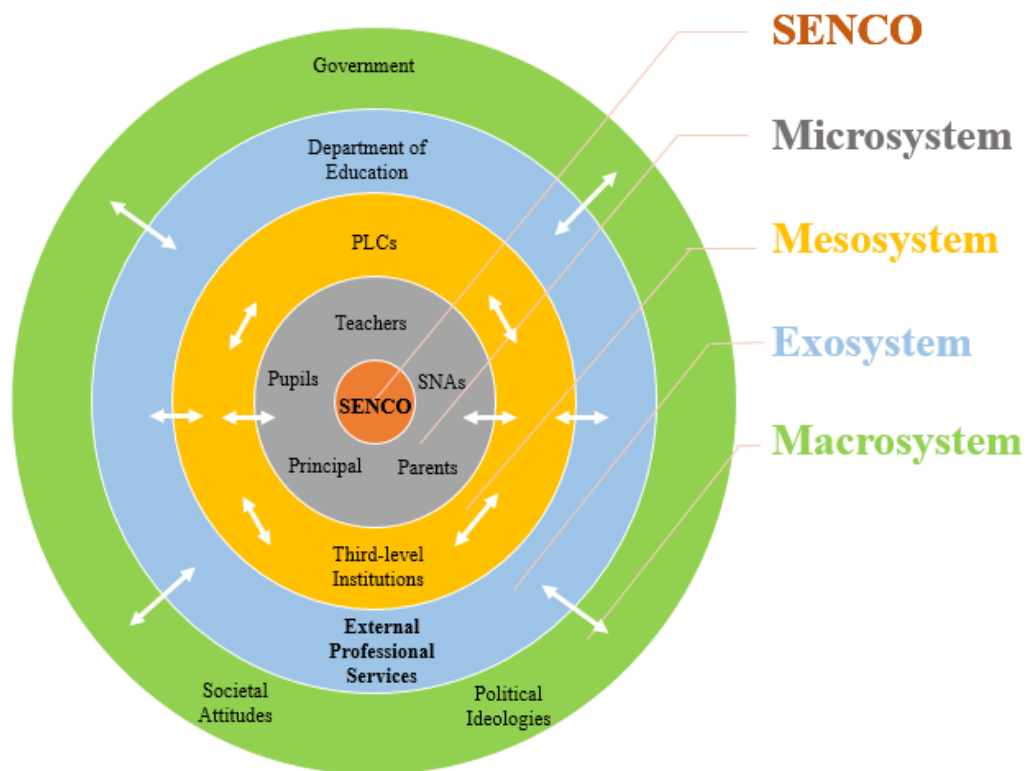


Figure 7.1: Findings represented within Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Bioecological Systems with 'External Professional Services' (in bold) out of reach in the exosystem.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.0 Introduction

A mixed-methods and interpretivist approach was adopted in this research to understand Irish SENCOs' and Principals' perspectives on the role of the SENCO, identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for their professional learning. This research involved the utilisation of two sequential phases and was framed by Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological system theory. This research adds to the existing body of knowledge as it provides insights into the current status quo and context of SENCOs in Ireland from this sample of 371 SENCOs. Phase One involved the first large-scale quantitative survey-based study of Irish primary SENCOs and thus provides insight into the realities of the SENCO role. The data also point to the extent that the role has organically evolved over the last number of years, since it's emergence in practice. In addition, this research contributes to the knowledge base due to its' sequential nature, which allowed for an in-depth examination of the role, and its design of exploring the perspectives of key members of the school microsystem, namely the SENCO, SENCO Principal and Principal. While many of the findings are echoed in national and international research, the outcomes from both phases point to a role that has moved from one focused predominately on operational issues to one where SENCOs are viewed as the leader of SEN in the microsystem.

In Chapter One the scene was set, rationale outlined, and the aims and research questions were detailed. Chapter Two explored the extant literature related to four central themes, namely inclusion, the SENCO role, leadership, and professional learning. This chapter provided the literature base that contributed to the research design and allowed for the later interpretation of the research findings. Chapter Three outlined the theoretical framework that acted as a guiding lens for this research, namely Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory. The methodology was detailed and defended in Chapter Four. The findings for Phase One and Two are presented in Chapters Five and Six respectively. In Chapter Seven these findings are integrated and interpreted in reference to the key literature and framed within Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory. Finally, the purpose of this

current chapter is to synthesise the key take-home messages from this research and draw conclusions with reference to the research questions. It presents a model of the SENCO role and interactions framed in Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory and offers direction on policy and practice based on the findings. A personal impact statement is presented. Finally, guidance is given on future recommendations for research on the SENCO role.

8.1 Research Questions Revisited

In this section key findings, from which conclusions and recommendations are drawn, are summarised briefly with respect to the research questions (Table 8.1).

Table 8.1: Research questions revisited.

Research Questions Revisited	Related Section
What are the demographics and profile of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?	8.1.1
What are the roles and responsibilities of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?	8.1.2
What are the perceived enablers to enactment of the SENCO role?	8.1.3
What are the perceived barriers to enactment of the SENCO role?	8.1.4
What are the professional learning needs of SENCOs and supports needed to allow them to effectively enact their role?	8.1.5

8.1.1 What are the demographics and profile of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?

In Ireland, prior to this research there had been no large-scale studies that sought to profile the SENCOs within the mainstream primary setting. Phase One of this research used a large-scale approach to ascertain the status quo of Irish mainstream primary SENCOs. SENCOs in Irish primary schools are primarily female, have extensive teaching experience and have relatively limited experience as a SENCO due to the emerging nature of the role. The SEN experience of the SENCOs varied somewhat with the majority having less than 10 years' experience as SETs.

All SENCOs, except for one, had other roles alongside their SENCO role, such as being a SET, class teacher, Principal and Deputy Principal, with the most common being SETs and SENCOs. The majority of SENCOs had postgraduate qualifications with just under half having a SEN-related third-level qualification. This could be viewed as significant considering that there is no mandate for SENCOs to undertake formal SENCO professional learning.

A significant finding was that an overwhelming majority of SENCOs held post of responsibilities and were part of the SLT in their school's microsystem. This points to the evolution of the role in Ireland from a situation where the majority did not occupy such positional leadership (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). Since SENCOs now are increasingly part of the leadership and management structures in schools they are well-placed to influence school-wide inclusive practices across the microsystem (Travers 2010; O'Gorman and Drudy 2011; Tissot 2013). Holding a post of responsibility also impacted on the SENCO role and elevated their perceived status within the school. Schools that had SENCOs with a post of responsibility were more likely to have SEN support teams and systems of collaboration in place. O'Neill and Logan (2012) outlined the importance of implementing structures and systems at whole-school level to ensure that collaboration occurs within schools. Of interest, the statistical analysis revealed that school size as opposed to the number of pupils with SEN or DEIS status influenced whether or not the SENCO had a post of responsibility.

Over half of the SENCOs with a post of responsibility were senior leaders. While this may be a reflection of the importance placed on the leadership role of the SENCO, it could also indicate that senior leaders are occupying the role due to the lack of policy guidance on the role from the Department of Education (exosystem). This raises the question as to whether or not senior leaders, such as Principals, are best placed to occupy this role due to their already extensive workload. Extensive workload and holding multiple roles was identified in this research and in the literature as a barrier to SENCO role enactment (Takala *et al.* 2009; Curran and Boddison 2021; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023).

8.1.2 What are the roles and responsibilities of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools?

SENCOs are leading and managing school-wide collaborative approaches to SEN provision. It was evident that all the SENCOs were viewed as the leader, the expert, the specialist, the '*Guru*' and the '*go to person*' regarding SEN in the school's microsystem. The SENCOs' responsibilities are extensive and the role is multi-faceted, which has been echoed in previous research (Kearns 2005; Takala and Ahl 2014; Smith and Broomhead 2019; Middleton and Kay 2021). The responsibilities of the SENCO, evident in this research, can be categorised into five broad areas, namely: leading the development and review of the school SEN policy; leading staff and the SET team in SEN provision using school-wide systems; leading the identification of pupils with additional needs; leading SEN and school initiatives (inclusive pedagogies); and leading staff development and professional learning within the area of SEN. SENCOs are using collaborative and distributed approaches whilst advocating for pupils with additional needs. It is somewhat of a balancing act for SENCOs who are navigating the neo-liberal accountability agendas from the exosystem while acting as advocates for pupils with SEN. The SENCO role appears to have moved from the position where it was largely operational in nature (Cole 2005; Rosen-Webb 2011; Fitzgerald and Radford 2017) to one where the SENCOs are occupying a more strategic perspective on their role. SENCOs are leading the development of the SEN policies and strategies in the school's microsystem and are the interpreters of policy, mediators of change and gatekeepers of knowledge and best practice within the microsystem. The SENCOs are using their leadership, experience and expertise to interpret policy from the exosystem, as well as best practice developments and research in order to influence colleagues' attitudes, knowledge and practice to inclusive special education. The SENCOs developed and implemented school-wide collaborative systems to allow them to lead the provision of SEN, which enabled a distributed approach. These collaborative and distributed approaches enabled SENCO agency (Fitzgerald and Radford 2020) and were instrumental in the SENCOs bringing about change in practice.

Not only were the SENCOs leading the provision of SEN but also they were leading the development and implementation of school-wide initiatives and inclusive pedagogies in various curricular areas. In reference to Kearns (2005) SENCO

typologies, the SENCO that emerged from this research could be viewed as occupying the SENCO as ‘Collaborator’ and ‘Expert’ roles to the greatest degree. This study also revealed that the SENCO is now approaching the role as a strategic leader, collaborative leader, mentor and to some extent as an advocacy leader (Clarke and Done 2021) and pedagogical leader (Hallett 2022). The SENCOs impact is evident across the entire school microsystem but the question remains is the role so extensive that the associated workload and time needed to effectively fulfil the role are acting as insurmountable barriers for SENCO role sustainability.

8.1.3 What are the perceived enablers to enactment of the SENCO role?

The enablers that were identified in both phases of this research echo existing national and international research in the field (Kugelmass and Ainscow 2004; Griffin *et al.* 2008; Struyve *et al.* 2018; Whalley 2018; Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020). Knowledge, professional learning, experience, supportive staff and Principals and a culture of collaboration were central factors that enabled the SENCO to do their role. Additional enablers included SENCOs being connected with colleagues and communities of practice. SENCOs highlighted that third-level qualifications, continued professional learning and connectedness through communities of practice facilitated the advancement of their professional capacity and confidence to respond to the challenges encountered when enacting the SENCO role. The findings in this study align with existing research, which has revealed that specific professional learning can develop SENCOs’ capacity as advocacy leader (Done *et al.* 2023) and can enhance SENCO status. SENCOs emphasised that engagement with communities of practice in the mesosystem allowed them to share, consult, collaborate, learn and discuss with other SENCOs. This professional dialogue, which is central to this ‘collaborative and grounded’ form of professional learning (Netolicky 2016, p.271), empowered the SENCOs and enhanced their connectedness, identity and collegiality (Fitzgerald 2022). The SENCOs’ knowledge afforded them terms such as the ‘*go to person*’ and the ‘*specialist*’ and ‘*Guru*’ and relate to the SENCO as ‘Expert’ typology (Kearns 2005).

To develop SENCO leadership status, an authority of expertise is imperative (Bush 2008). The SENCO’s experience, particularly in the area of SEN, gave them

the legitimacy to act as teacher leaders (Struyve *et al.* 2018) and enhanced the trust and respect that Principals and staff had in the SENCOs. This afforded SENCOs with agency to mediate changes and lead and manage the provision of SEN across the microsystem.

Of significance, a culture of collaboration and supportive staff and Principals facilitated the SENCO to lead through school-wide systems and distributed approaches. Within the schools there was a willingness and a culture for all members of the microsystem to share, collaborate and work with each other to optimise outcomes for pupils. This culture in turn fostered trust and collegiality and resulted in a setting where SENCOs were able to lead through the development and implementation of distributed approaches and school-wide collaborative systems. This culture of collaboration was a significant force that positively influenced the school microsystem (Mora-Ruano *et al.* 2019). The Principals were instrumental in supporting the SENCOs in their role and the trust and value that they placed in the SENCOs afforded them with agency to effect positive change within the microsystem. While the Principals shared tasks, responsibilities and decision-making with SENCOs the respect that they had for the SENCOs was reflected in the fact that they were directed by the SENCOs' expert knowledge and experience. Through distributed approaches, Principals fostered a climate of collaboration and encouraged, engaged with and empowered the SENCO in their 'collaborative quest' (Hargreaves 2019, p.16) to lead and manage SEN provision and inclusive pedagogies.

8.1.4 What are the perceived barriers to enactment of the SENCO role?

Literature has referred to various barriers to enactment of the SENCO role, such as a lack of time, extensive workload, lack of formal role recognition, as well as inadequate and limited external agency support (Abbott 2007; O'Gorman and Drudy 2011; Whalley 2018; Smith and Broomhead 2019; Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020). This sequential large-scale research concurs with these barriers and provides insight into the challenges experienced by SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools. SENCOs are essentially working within a policy vacuum with no role clarity, recognition, formal training or guidance on duties and designated non-contact time, which adds to both the nebulous and extensive nature of the role. Without recognition

or policy guidance on the role from the exosystem, SENCOs are creating and shaping their own role from the ground up (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017; Hallett 2022). Aligned to this SENCOs are navigating flux in the system with the ever-changing landscape regarding educational policy in Ireland, and are attempting to balance neo-liberal accountability agendas with the need to advocate for pupils with SEN.

The ambiguous and limited policy guidance is resulting in SENCOs holding multiple roles and responsibilities and having an extensive workload with insufficient dedicated time for their SENCO duties. Policy changes related to SEN, namely SETAM (DES 2017a; DE 2024) and accountability agendas stemming from the exosystem have increased school autonomy and the associated administrative and bureaucratic workloads for SENCOs, without the facilitation of ring-fenced time for these duties (Fitzgerald and Radford 2020; Doyle 2021; Walsh 2021; Hallett 2022). The SENCOs depicted in this research were committed professionals who overcame these barriers by completing many of their SENCO duties in their own personal time, in the evenings and during weekends and holidays. Such an approach was applauded by Principals who also acknowledged that this was not sustainable or feasible over the longer term. Regardless, it continues to happen due to the demands of the role and due to SENCOs being passionate advocates for pupils with additional needs.

Central to inclusive special education is the engagement and collaboration with external professional services and agencies (Hornby 2015). The fostering, nurturing and development of close and effective collaborations with these agencies in the mesosystem is imperative to enable SENCOs to lead provision for pupils with SEN (Drudy and Kinsella 2009; Hornby 2015; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023). In both phases of this research, it was clear that there was inadequate and often non-existent support from external professional services. The engagement with these agencies in the mesosystem was insufficient. SENCOs were attempting to fill the void by organising for private professional services to support pupils and staff and consulting as best they could with parents and families, which is in contrast to the reasons to why there was a move to SETAM. Without sufficient support from professional services within the mesosystem and potentially embedded in the school's microsystem, SENCOs will struggle to minimise the marginalisation and exclusion of pupils with SEN and / or disabilities from the education system.

8.1.5 What are the professional learning needs of SENCOs and supports needed to allow them to effectively enact their role?

Professional Learning Needs

The findings across both phases of this study evidenced the enormity of the role and the overwhelming desire from both SENCOs and Principals for professional learning that is specific to the SENCO role and is reflective of the associated learning needs of the SENCOs. The learning needs that were specified not only included SEN specific components but also areas related to leadership, inclusive policies, theoretical perspectives, the law and SEN as well as contemporary issues in inclusive special education. Interestingly, those holding a post of responsibility highlighted the importance of knowledge in leadership and management in their role and are calling out for its inclusion in a SENCO specific professional learning programme. All of these areas would bolster the capacity and competencies of the SENCO in their strategic role and further develop the collaborative and advisory role they play. This would equip them in their attempts to respond and adapt as they implement changes in practice due to new procedures being bestowed on them from the exosystem and allow them to develop their competency in serving as change agents in our schools (Tangen 2005)

As SENCOs are navigating the changes that have, and are occurring in schools, new learning is essential across the microsystem to foster collaborative approaches and build social capital within the microsystem and other systems, such as the mesosystem. The creation of schools as learning organisations and communities of practice within schools has been evidenced in this research. Communities of practice allow SENCOs ‘to act as a frame and as a bridge’ (Girelli *et al.* 2019, p. 103) as they bridge social capital and therefore connect people ‘with others beyond their immediate reference group, opening up new ways of seeing, relating and learning’ (Swaffield and MacBeath 2009, p.45). In this research, the growth and development of communities of practice within and between schools was highlighted as a preferred type of teacher professional learning. The communities of practice can develop SENCOs’ competence in being effective strategic leaders as they have the potential to bring SENCOs together in a collaborative setting to learn from each other. It has been recommended that professional communities should become central in whole-school practice in Ireland

and therefore supports and procedures need to be established from the exosystem (Department of Education) to foster their growth and development.

In this research, SENCOs and Principals were supportive of a SENCO specific third-level programme, which should entail a focus on leadership, evidence-informed practices, new initiatives and new research, the operation of the SENCO role and on practical elements. The incorporation of practical elements with SENCOs working together is akin to a professional learning community and would enhance the SENCOs' capacity to lead inclusive special education. Research has emphasised that an accredited master's level course is imperative to develop SENCOs' critical literacy, analytical and research skills which are needed to enhance their capacity as advocacy leaders (Done *et al.* 2023).

Additional Supports Needed

SENCOs and Principals highlighted the need for specific guidance at policy level for the SENCO role, dedicated non-contact time for SENCO duties and greater collaboration with external professional services to support them in their role. SENCOs are operating in a policy vacuum with no role recognition, direction or clarity, which is adding to the nebulous and extensive nature of the role. They are calling out for such policy direction from the exosystem and the mandating of dedicated non-contact time for their SENCO duties. The findings illustrated that SENCO duties and responsibilities need to be prioritised and the role should have a mandated post within the leadership structures of schools to afford SENCOs the opportunity to advance school-wide inclusive values and practices (Travers 2010; O'Gorman and Drudy 2011; Tissot 2013). Future policy should consider these findings and the leadership role of the SENCO. The recent NCSE (2024) policy advice paper on inclusive education does not recognise the SENCO or provide recommendations on the impact of the policy advice on the future direction of the SENCO role.

Engagement with external professional services is integral to Hornby's (2015) theory of inclusive special education and is problematic in the Irish context, as evident in this research, as collaboration with and access to external professional services for schools and pupils is inadequate or non-existent. This is reflective of these agencies residing in the exosystem, out of reach of the SENCO, staff, pupils and parents. These external professional services (therapeutic professionals) are so out of reach that the

recent SETAM Circular (DE 2024) has excluded complex needs from their profiling for SET allocations due to insufficient, inaccurate and inconsistent data from the HSE Children Disability Network Teams (DE 2024). This current research highlighted that there was a system-wide capacity issue regarding external agency support, which are destitute of resources and ineffective at meeting the demands across the school microsystem. This places significant pressures on the SENCO and the microsystem as they compensate as best they can to minimise the marginalisation of pupils with SEN. The role of the SENCO as an advocacy leader (Clarke and Done 2021) is vital here to ensure that the needs and voice of the pupils are heard and addressed. The SENCOs and Principals in this research reiterate the need for a more coordinated and collaborative approach between schools and these external professionals. At a minimum, engagement with these agencies should happen at the mesosystem level and consideration should be given to the system-wide incorporation of external professional services, such as the In-School Therapy School Demonstration Project, within the school microsystem, as outlined in the NCSE (2024) policy advice paper. This project has recently been described by the Minister of State for Special Education and Inclusion as ‘an important reform for our special education system that will see therapy supports provided in schools’ settings’ (DE 2021). It is evidenced in the literature that capacity-building initiatives, such as in-school therapy, that foster strong partnerships between teachers and therapists can lead to earlier identification of pupils with SEN and can enhance the ability of school staff to effectively meet the challenges and needs of these pupils (Anaby *et al.* 2018). Howe and Griffin (2020, p.51) have asserted that key members of capacity-building models should be educational psychologists as they ‘can serve to empower schools within a process of mutual reflection and learning’. Integrated systems of therapeutic, health and educational services within the school’s microsystem, such as the In-School Therapy Support Demonstration Project, have the potential to foster interprofessional collaborative cultures in schools, where teachers are more supported and prepared to meet the needs of all pupils, including those with specific and complex needs (Curtin 2021).

8.2 Overall Conclusions from Findings

There are two main conclusions that can be derived from the findings of this research, which present somewhat of a ‘double-edged’ sword in the enactment of SENCO role. It is evident that SENCOs are leaders for inclusive special educations across the school microsystem but the enormity of the role and the identified barriers threatens the long-term sustainability of this significant leadership role.

SENCOs in this research adopted the role of strategic, collaborative, advocacy and pedagogical leader. Their leadership was instrumental for the development of systematic and collaborative school-wide approaches to provision. Essentially the SENCOs leadership was enabling of these school-wide collaborative and distributive approaches. These school-wide systems effectively facilitated the SENCO to lead the identification of pupils with additional needs, the implementation of provision plans, the sharing of knowledge, the development of in-school communities of practice, the promotion and implementation of inclusive pedagogies and the development of the school as a learning organisation. It also provided SENCOs with the opportunity and the mechanism through which they could advocate for pupils with additional needs and the inclusive special education agenda. These SENCOs were passionate, driven, committed, highly respected, valued, knowledgeable and experienced and their leadership, through school-wide systematic and collaborative approaches, was central to the effective enactment of the role. The culture of collaboration and support from staff and Principals evident throughout the research facilitated the SENCO in leading inclusive special education across the school microsystem. These SENCOs were the enactors of policy (Ball *et al.* 2012) and took on the responsibility of filtering policy and practice from the macrosystem, exosystem and mesosystem through to the school microsystem.

The multi-faceted nature of the SENCO role, however, contributed to the enormity of the role which is in-turn risking the sustainability of this vital leadership position. The SENCO role has insufficient dedicated non-teaching time for the SENCOs to fulfil their duties and responsibilities. It is clearly documented that SENCOs are completing many of their duties out of school times, at home, at weekends and during holiday time. SENCOs are operating in a policy vacuum with no official role recognition, guidance or clarity. There is a glaring lack of support from

external professionals' services, which is acting as a barrier to SENCOs truly advancing inclusive special education in the school microsystem. All of these factors are acting as barriers to SENCO role enactment and are threatening the future sustainability of the SENCO role. SENCOs are calling out for support, policy advice and direction from the exosystem and macrosystem, with a view to formalising the role, mandating dedicated non-contact time and ultimately securing the future sustainability of this strategic leadership position within the management structures of the school's microsystem. For the past 14 years, research in Ireland on leadership for inclusive special education has been calling for these policy and practice changes (Travers 2010; O'Gorman and Drudy 2011; Fitzgerald and Radford 2017; Colum and Mac Ruairc 2023; Walsh 2023).

8.3 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

8.3.1 Recommendations for policy

This research has clearly revealed that the SENCO in Irish mainstream primary schools is a critical school leader in the promotion and provision of inclusive special education. The SENCO is the leader of SEN provision and of universal and specialist provision within the school's microsystem. This research has revealed that SENCOs have posts of responsibility in schools and are embedded within the leadership structures of the schools. Currently they are well-placed to lead and influence school-wide inclusive special education across the microsystem due to their positional leadership (Cole 2005; O'Gorman and Drudy 2011; Oldham and Radford 2011; Tissot 2013; Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). Aligned to this, this research illustrated that Irish mainstream primary SENCOs are highly educated, knowledgeable and connected professionals who are hugely valued, respected and trusted within the leadership structures of the schools. The SENCO role, which has organically evolved from the ground up, is now in need of support from the exosystem as the sustainability of this extremely impactful role within schools is at risk. Should policy makers now take on board the realities and practices that are observed on the ground to develop the SENCO role? Given this and in response to the barriers and future direction insights that were elicited in this research, it is imperative that the role is formalised and recognised at the exosystem level to further consolidate the SENCOs' agency and capacity as

strategic leaders and to ensure the sustainability of the role. Ultimately, this needs to happen to optimise best outcomes for all and to minimise marginalisation of pupils. The specific recommendations for policy that stem from this research are as follows:

- The role needs to be recognised and referenced in policy by the Department of Education. It should be a mandated role within school structures and should have a post of responsibility, at a minimum AP1 level attached to it. Half of the SENCOs in Phase One were senior leaders but it is questionable whether the Principal or Deputy Principal is best placed to act as SENCO given their already extensive workload and responsibilities. It may be more appropriate for the SENCO to have a full post of responsibility solely related to inclusive special education but this is dependent on the school size and context. Regardless there should be a formal post for the SENCO role where the promotion of inclusive special education is a central focus of this post. This should be a new post of responsibility outside of the school's current post of responsibility schedule.
- There should be dedicated non-contact time for the SENCO to ensure that they have scheduled time and space to effectively lead and manage school-wide collaborative team-based approaches to inclusive special education within the microsystem. There should be non-contact time scheduled into the SENCO's timetable, which is protected for SENCO related duties. The amount of time allocated to each school should reflect contextual factors such as the size of the school, the amount of children with additional needs within the school, the complexity of these needs and the number of support staff and number of SETs in the SEN team. The amount of protected time may fluctuate depending on the time of year for example in June and September for leading the planning of SEN provision within the school. This dedicated non-contact time could also be in the form of SENCO release days similar to the teaching Principal release days.
- Policy guidance and direction needs to provide clarity on the SENCO role where the responsibilities of the SENCO are clearly identified and prioritised. Such responsibilities would include leading staff in SEN provision; leading the identification of pupils with additional needs; leading SEN interventions, school initiatives and inclusive pedagogies; leading the school's SEN policy

and leading staff development and professional learning in the area of SEN. This research revealed that the role is enormous and nebulous and school Principals are calling out for support for their staff that are leading inclusive special education in their schools.

- Policy guidance is required on SENCO specific professional learning. SENCOs are no longer just the expert and specialist in SEN. They are strategic leaders for inclusive special education and the promoters and mediators of change in practice within schools. Considering this, there needs to be direction and guidance from the Department of Education on appropriate professional learning for SENCOs that aims to develop the requisite skill sets to develop these competencies. Such professional learning should include the development of SENCOs' research skills, critical literacy capabilities and theoretical perspectives to enable SENCOs to interpret policy changes and 'influence SLT thinking' (Done *et al.* 2023 p. 203). There also needs to be content related to leadership and management, inclusive policies, contemporary issues and the law and SEN in order to advance SENCOs' capacity as strategic leaders. The findings highlighted that preferred types of professional learning for SENCOs include university-based postgraduate programmes and professional learning communities. HEI's could develop and run SENCO specific postgraduate programmes in partnership with the Department of Education and these could be delivered through various modes such as block release, a blended learning approach, or through micro-credentials, which are professional development stand-alone accredited modules. There is potential for these micro-credentials to be delivered in partnership with the Education Centres to ensure that they are accessible to as many SENCOs as possible. The value of professional learning communities in developing SENCOs' leadership competencies is well established and the Department of Education need to develop policy, structures, and processes to foster the development of these communities across the mesosystem level in Ireland. The Education Centres could facilitate these professional learning communities and time could be allocated by the Department of Education to enable SENCOs to engage with these communities. There is a role for consultation on best practice between external agencies, such as NEPS and the NSCE, and these professional learning communities.

- Policy guidance is needed from both the exosystem (Department) and macrosystem (Government) to address the system-wide capacity issue related to external professional services. As the findings illustrated, support and services from these external agencies are hugely inadequate, not fit for purpose and at times non-existent. Appropriate and effective collaboration and support for schools from these agencies is essential within the education system to ensure that the needs of pupils are being met so that they can progress in learning. Systemic changes are needed from the macrosystem level to address this under-resourcing and ensure that all schools are receiving the support that is required for their pupils from these professional services. This would align with the principles of Hornby's (2015) model and assist in the implementation of effective inclusive special education. The recent policy advice paper from the NCSE could be viewed as aligning with Hornby's model as it outlines a co-location/ campus style education system with flexible movement between provisions, whole of education system reform and greater partnerships with the HSE and external professional services, which supports a continuum of provision (NCSE 2024). Currently these services are residing in the exosystem but they need to at least be in the mesosystem but ideally they should be embedded within the school microsystem to optimise outcomes and learning for all. This would allow for regular sustained in-school support from specialist services, such as the NEPS, Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists and the HSE. Aligned to this, providers of professional training for specialist and therapeutic services could incorporate aspects related to interprofessional education and interprofessional collaboration. In Figure 8.1 a conceptual depiction of all stakeholders is provided from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory, which shows the external professional services residing both within the meso- and micro-system. The figure also shows that there should be close collaboration between the Department of Health and the Department of Education to overcome the current siloing of Government departments. Figure 8.1 shows arrows depicting this collaboration and communication channels between the Government, the Departments and the external professional services. Such collaboration and joined up thinking are needed to address the systemic failures that currently exist in the external professional services, for example HSE, NCSE and NEPS.

It is imperative that the failures within the current service delivery model are addressed and that the external professional services are embedded in a collaborative, meaningful, systematic and impactful manner within the microsystem of the school to positively influence outcomes for all. These interacting and interdependent factors are complex and influence how SENCOs fulfil their roles and must be addressed in a systematic manner to truly advance inclusive special education within the school’s microsystem. The SENCO is a critical mediator and filter of all policies and practices into and out of the microsystem and this depiction is evident in the arrows that flow between the centre of the bioecological system and the macrosystem level in Figure 8.1. In summary, there needs to be action from the government (macrosystem) to address the systemic failures in the delivery of external professional services and a commitment to embed these services in a sustainable, integrated and effective manner within the school microsystem.

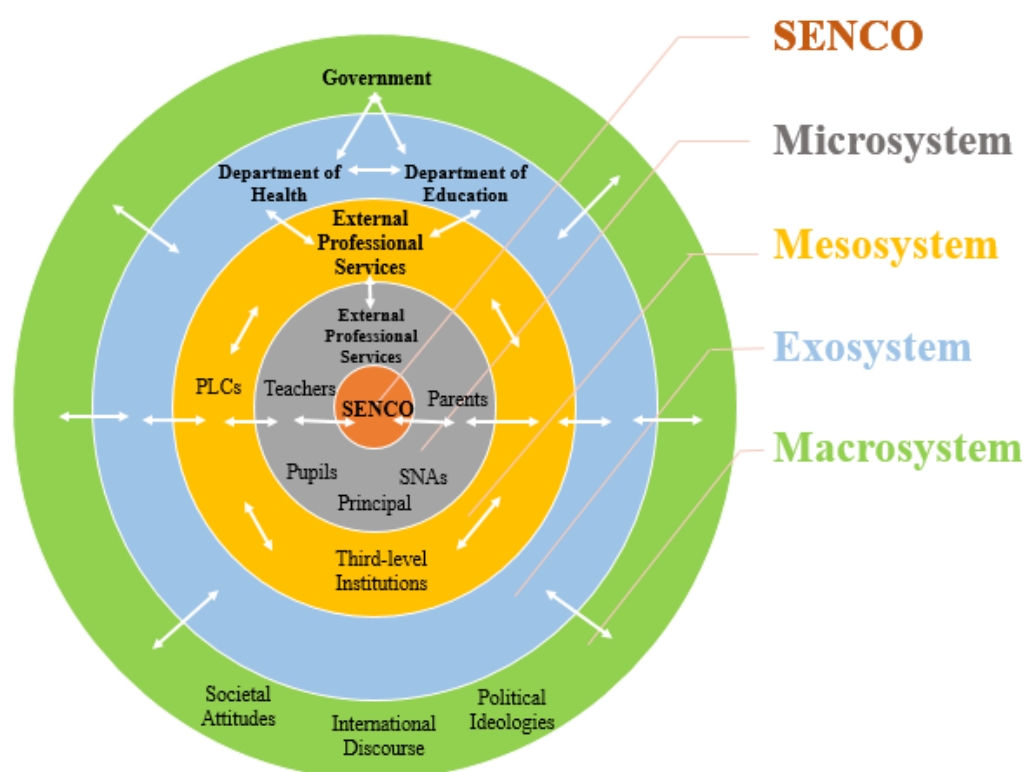


Figure 8.1: Conceptual depiction of stakeholders from perspective of Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) bioecological systems theory.

Note ‘**External Professional Services**’ (bold) in mesosystem and microsystem and the collaboration between Government, Departments and External Professional Services.

Finally, future policy regarding education provision in Ireland needs to acknowledge the SENCO and consider how policy change would impact on the SENCO role. In January 2024, the NCSE published their policy advice paper *An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society*, which outlines a series of recommendations aimed at the further development of education provision for pupils with SEN. Specifically the NCSE (2024, p.15) in this paper ‘recommends that Ireland’s education system should advance progressively to become a fully inclusive system – a system which will enable all students to access education in their local schools’. Whether this advice is realistic, attainable or indeed appropriate for the Irish context is questionable. Hornby and Kauffman (2024, p.8) have asserted that after many years of unsuccessful attempts to develop ‘an idealistic vision of full inclusion’ in various parts of the world, ‘the full inclusion movement has come to a dead-end because of its inability to demonstrate effective inclusion...’. Would it not be more apt to consider a provision that is ‘dedicated’, as purported by Hornby and Kauffman (2023), for pupils with diverse and complex needs? Recent research has emphasised that an approach that combines the philosophy of inclusive education with the strategies from special education, that is inclusive special education, should be implemented by education systems (Hornby and Kauffman 2024). The NCSE policy advice (NCSE 2024) does acknowledge the importance of specialist provision and placement so it could be argued that it is adopting the inclusive special education framework and a more temperate approach, which does not fully align with the ratification of the UNCRPD (2006). Of interest, this recent policy advice acknowledges the importance of ‘inclusive leadership practices’ (NCSE 2024, p.15) but makes no reference to the SENCO role. This omission is somewhat surprising given the important and critical role that SENCOs in Ireland play in leading SEN provision in schools and ensuring best outcomes for all. Any future policy advice and policy direction from the exosystem must acknowledge the central and critical support role that SENCOs play in the leadership structures within schools.

8.3.2 Recommendations for practice

Professional Learning: Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

Professional learning related to the SENCO role should commence at the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) stage. Undergraduate programmes for pre-service teachers should include the significance of leadership and management in the area of SEN. These modules should incorporate the roles and responsibilities of the SENCO and should aim to develop pre-service teachers' capacity to collaborate so that they can effectively work as part of a team in meeting the needs of all pupils. In order to enable these teachers to work collaboratively with external professional services this professional training should also incorporate interprofessional education and interprofessional collaboration. Inclusive pedagogical approaches, such as UDL, should be a central focus of these ITE courses. This aligns with the ITE standards from *Céim*, which outline that ITE programmes need to aim to improve student teachers 'capacity to address and respond to the diversity of learners' needs' which includes 'additional learning needs (e.g. autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia) and learning needs associated with diverse linguistic, socioeconomic, cultural and ethnic (including Traveller community, Roma) backgrounds' (The Teaching Council 2020, p.4). Competency development for inclusion needs to commence at the beginning of a teacher's professional learning, namely ITE stage (EASNIE 2019).

For SENCOs, professional learning should focus on leadership for inclusive special education to enhance SENCOs' competencies as strategic leaders. This research highlighted the role that SENCOs have as specialists and as strategic promoters of inclusive special education in the school's microsystem. They are using collaborative and distributed leadership approaches and are 'leading learning' (Hallett and Hallett 2017) through professional learning communities. The SENCO evident in this research is not only a specialist, expert, and strategic and collaborative leader but now the SENCO is also displaying characteristics of a 'advocacy leader' (Clarke and Done 2021) and 'pedagogical lead' (Hallett 2022). The skills needed to develop pedagogical and advocacy leaders include, for example, critical literacy, research, analytical, relational and advocacy skills. Content and knowledge related to leadership and management, theoretical perspectives, policy, contemporary issues and evidenced informed practice are necessary to develop pedagogical and advocacy leaders. The

findings point to the need for a third-level postgraduate programmes and access to professional learning communities to develop and consolidate these key competencies. Higher Education Institutions should consider the development of an accredited postgraduate course for SENCOs. The feasibility of such a programme hinges on policy support from the Department of Education (exosystem) and Government (macrosystem) and this is reflected in the recommendations for policy section of this chapter. Institutions could also consider the development of a suite of micro-credentials that SENCOs could attain over time to lead to any SENCO postgraduate award. Adopting a practical approach to any third-level postgraduate programme emerged strongly from the Principals in this research. Institutions should consider how they could structure a postgraduate programme or micro-credentials so that placements and practical learning experiences are embedded within the programmes.

The key components of a SENCO specific third-level programme that have derived from both phases of this research are outlined in Figures 8.2-8.4. These components are grouped into three competency areas; namely ‘Professional Knowledge’, ‘Professional Skills’, and ‘Leading Provision’. These are in line with the competency and content areas from the previous SENCO related postgraduate programme in England, NASENCo (Hallett and Hallett 2017). In Figure 8.2, the professional learning components related to the area, ‘Professional Knowledge’ are depicted. These are the components that aim to enhance SENCOs professional knowledge of key content areas relevant to their role. It includes areas such as ‘evidenced informed practice/ research developments’ and ‘policy’. It aims to equip SENCOs with the knowledge needed to lead inclusive special education within the school microsystem.



Figure 8.2: Professional learning components related to ‘Professional Knowledge’.

In Figure 8.3, the professional learning components related to ‘Professional Skills’ are illustrated. These include skills such as ‘pedagogical skills’, ‘relational and communicative skills’. The development of these professional skills is essential to enable SENCOs to act as strategic leaders within the management structures of the school. These would also advance the SENCOs advocacy and pedagogical leadership capabilities.



Figure 8.3: Professional learning components related to ‘Professional Skills’.

Central to any professional learning are components related to ‘Leading Provision’. These components are depicted in Figure 8.4 and include such components as ‘leadership’, ‘mentoring’, strategic development’ and ‘digital literacy’. All of these components are necessary to develop the SENCO’s capacity to lead provision within the school microsystem.



Figure 8.4: Professional learning components related to ‘Leading Provision’.

Finally, Higher Education Institutions should consider the role that they can play in supporting, nurturing and promoting the establishment and development of professional learning communities across the mesosystem. Institutions should collaboratively work with the Department of Education, NCSE, NEPS and local school communities regarding the facilitation of these communities. This will open up research opportunities for researchers and teacher researchers to engage in contextually relevant and translational research.

Recommendations for SENCOs

This research highlighted the value for SENCOs of the school-wide systems that they developed and implemented in enabling a team-based collaborative and distributed approach to inclusive special education. SENCOs should ensure that they continue to foster this approach when leading and managing provision and delegate certain responsibilities and ownership of these responsibilities across the team. Such an approach has the potential to positively impact on the sustainability of the SENCO

role, and afford them the opportunity to act as strategic leaders and to promote inclusive pedagogy in their microsystem.

SENCOs should engage with professional learning designed to develop the knowledge and competencies needed to act as strategic leaders, mediators of change, advocacy leaders and pedagogical leads. Given policy turbulence, neo-liberal and accountability agendas it is of utmost importance that SENCOs develop their competences to advocate for pupils with additional needs and their families. They need the critical literacy skill-set to interpret policy, research and political ideologies so that pupils are not marginalised from the education system. Central to SENCOs' professional learning is engagement with professional learning communities both within and between schools. These communities can enable dialogue, stimulate learning, foster collegiality and generate new knowledge (Cambridge *et al.* 2005) and thus allow the SENCOs to 'develop and sustain inclusive practices in the longer term' (Brennan and King 2022, p.175).

The further development of in-school communities of practice can 'facilitate professional dialogue, collaboration and knowledge exchange' for all staff (OECD 2016, p.10). Within these communities, distributed and collaborative approaches can flourish and professional learning for all staff can be facilitated. SENCOs should work in collaboration with Principals to formally establish these in-school communities of practice and work to ensure that time and resources are allocated to support and facilitate these communities. Such communities would facilitate a process of deep learning and engagement and further embed a collaborative team-based approach to provision across the microsystem, thus enhancing the implementation of new practices (King 2014; Raftery 2021). Furthermore if dedicated time for leadership was ring-fenced, it would increase the likelihood of this happening.

8.4 Recommendations for Further Research

This is the first large-scale national study of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools and has provided some insightful findings related to the realities, context, profile and challenges of SENCOs in Ireland. The sequential approach adopted in this research facilitated an in-depth exploration of the SENCO role from the perspectives of both SENCOs and Principals. While the findings have contributed substantially to

our knowledge regarding the SENCO role and leadership for inclusive special education, they have raised questions that further research should attempt to address. Examples of these research areas are as follows:

- Research should consider the perspectives of other members of the school microsystem, such as parents and pupils, on their lived experiences of provision within the school setting. This would incorporate parental and pupil voice and thus allow for further exploration of the leadership for inclusive special education.
- This research illustrated that the changes and influences from the macrosystem and exosystem have a cascading effect on the lived experiences of SENCOs at the microsystem level. Research should incorporate the viewpoints of the key members of the macrosystem and exosystem on the SENCO role and the leadership for inclusive special education. A qualitative approach could be adopted with members of these systems, such as the NCSE, HSE, Department of Education, the DE Inspectorate, teaching unions, and Government representatives, on the enactment and future development of the SENCO role and leadership in this area.
- Research should consider the role that SENCOs play in enabling and supporting class teachers to adopt inclusive pedagogical approaches to provision for all. Research has focused to date on enablers for SENCO role enactment and there is a lack of studies that examine how the SENCO can support the class teacher in their responsibility of progressing all pupils' learning. A qualitative and quantitative approach could be adopted to garner an in-depth perspective on this research area.
- A case study and/ or intervention-based approach could be adopted to explore the potential of professional learning communities in enhancing the SENCOs' agency and to further develop their capacity to act as strategic leaders.
- A pilot study to develop collaborative links between staff in special schools and mainstream schools to enhance professional learning opportunities would be of benefit for the SENCO role and align with the vision of inclusive special education. This study could explore opportunities for school exchanges, teacher shadowing, observation, sharing of knowledge and expertise and the development of cross-setting communities of practice.

- A longitudinal study exploring the lived experiences of children in special classes and special schools could ascertain the extent to which these settings provide dedicated provision, which is meaningful, optimises pupil outcomes and achieves the outcomes envisaged by inclusive special education. Such findings could have implications for SENCO role enactment.

8.5 Distinct Contribution to Theory

This study was distinct and original as it employed a large-scale approach together with in-depth qualitative interviews to explore the profile, realities and lived experiences of SENCOs in Irish mainstream primary schools. Prior to this study, no previous research had undertaken a national large-scale study to ascertain the status of Irish primary school SENCOs. Consequently, this research has added to our knowledge and understanding of the SENCO role in the Irish primary school setting and has provided direction of the professional learning needs and supports needed for the future development of this important strategic leadership role for inclusive special education.

Uniquely the findings from this research have provided insight into the theoretical framing of the SENCO role, which previously has existed in an atheoretical bubble (Hallett 2021). This study conceptualised the SENCO role within Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (2005) with the SENCO positioned in the centre of the system. This theoretical framing of the SENCO role allowed for an exploration of the interdependent and interconnected factors impacting on the enactment of the SENCO role. It provided a framework to conceptualise how changes over time (chronosystem) at societal, international and governmental level (macrosystem) had a cascading effect across the bioecological system and influenced the practices of the SENCO within their school microsystem. It illustrated how the connections with certain stakeholders, such as the HSE and external professional services, are inadequate with a thinly populated mesosystem. It allowed for the identification of factors that enabled the SENCO in their role and factors that acted as barriers to role enactment. The approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the context behind many of the realities and challenges faced by SENCOs to further our understanding of the multi-faceted nature of the SENCO role. Bronfenbrenner's

Bioecological Systems Theory (2005) provided a framework for the conceptualisation of the enactment of the SENCO role within the education system and this depiction is illustrated in Figure 8.1.

In summary, the distinct contribution to theory relates to the knowledge gained on the SENCO role through Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theoretical lens. This approach has provided insight into the complex nature of the interconnecting factors influencing SENCO role enactment. In particular, the theoretical approach taken in this study has resulted in a novel understanding of the positioning of the role in collaboration with all stakeholders within the bioecological systems. From a methodological perspective, this research offers direction on the theoretical approach that future national and international research can adopt to deepen our understanding of the complexities and realities of the SENCO role.

8.6 Personal Impact Statement

As a result of this research, I am acutely aware of the importance of the SENCO role in Irish mainstream schools. From the research, I realise the importance of the positioning of the role within the leadership and management structures. As a SET, I believe the SENCO is a pivotal leadership position within the school and it is difficult to understand that the role is not formally recognised in any policy documents. Without the leadership of a SENCO, the collaborative and distributed approaches needed for provision of SEN and inclusive pedagogies would be limited. The SET role would be difficult to undertake as the provision of SEN and inclusive pedagogies are provided by a team approach and it is the ability to lead the SEN team that ensures the best outcomes for all learners.

Given the recent policy advice documents (NCSE 2024) and policy changes (SETAM, DE 2024) that failed to acknowledge the SENCO role, it is imperative that the findings, conclusions and recommendations from this research are disseminated widely. To date there have been a number of dissemination contributions from my research, and these have generally been in the form of conference presentations. These contributions together with future planned contributions are detailed in Table 8.2.

Table 8.2: Disseminating the research.

Dissemination Platform	Contribution
Completed	
MIC Thesis-in-Three Competition, Feb. 2022	February 2022: Presented at the MIC Research Week. Title: 'Can the SENCO role be defined?' Audience: Researchers.
International Research Methods Summer School (IRMSS) Conference, MIC, May 2022.	May 2022: Presented an oral presentation at the IRMSS Conference. Title: 'Leadership in Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools: An Exploration of the Role of the SENCO.' Audience: Researchers.
Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA) Annual Conference, Sept 2022.	September 2022: Presented an oral presentation at the ILSA Annual Conference. Title: 'SENCO Leadership Role: What does the literature say?' Audience: Practitioners, teachers and schools leaders.
UL AHSS Faculty Postgraduate Conference, May 2023.	May 2023: Presented a poster at the UL AHSS Faculty Postgraduate Conference. Title: 'The SENCO Role: A National Representative Study of the Realities of the SENCO Role in Irish Primary Schools.' Audience: Researchers.
ILSA Annual Conference, Sept 2023.	September 2023: Presented a poster at the 2023 ILSA Annual Conference. Title: 'SENCO Role in Irish Primary Schools: Survey to Explore the Lived Experiences of SENCOs.' Audience: Practitioners, teachers and school leaders.
Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI), Inclusive Education Special Interest Group Newsletter. First peer-reviewed publication.	November 2023: First peer-reviewed publication in the ESAI Inclusive Education Newsletter. Title: 'Leadership in Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools: An Exploration of the Role of the SENCO.' Audience: Researchers and practitioners.
ESAI Annual Conference, April 2024.	April 2024: Presented an oral presentation at the ESAI Annual Conference. Title: 'Profile of the SENCO Role in Irish Primary Schools.' Audience: Researchers and policymakers.
MIC MISU and RGS Postgraduate Research Day, April 2024	April 2024: Presented a poster at the MIC Postgraduate Research Day. Title: 'SENCO Role: Leadership for Inclusive Education'. Audience: Researchers and teacher educators.

Planned Submissions	
International Journal of Inclusive Education	Currently preparing a submission to this Quartile One international journal on the results from Phase One. Title: ‘SENCO Role Status in Ireland: Facilitators and Barriers to SENCO Role Enactment.’ Planned Submission Date: May 2024. Audience: Researchers and policymakers.
European Journal of Inclusive Education	Planned submission on Phase Two to this Quartile One journal. Title: ‘In-depth Analysis of the Lived Experiences of SENCOs in Irish Primary Schools.’ Planned Submission Date: August 2024. Audience: Researchers and policymakers.
ILSA Conference September 2024	Plan to submit an abstract on the key recommendations from both phases of this doctoral research. Audience: Practitioners, teachers and school leaders.

Additionally, I am motivated to present the outcomes of this research to SENCOs currently working in primary school settings. I plan on presenting the outcomes of this work to SENCO professional learning communities, such as the Limerick SENCO Forum, the Clare SENCO Forum and the Kerry SENCO Forum. Prior to the data collection, I presented the research plans of this study to these professional learning networks so it would be apt and timely to now revisit these groups and update them on the central outcomes and recommendations derived from this research. I am also motivated to disseminate this research to pre-service teachers in ITE programmes and to SETs and SENCOs undertaking the postgraduate diploma in SEN. Over the coming months I plan on continuing to present this research at national conferences to disseminate the research and contribute to the ongoing national discourse relating to leadership and management of inclusive special education. Through the dissemination of my research (conference and journal publications), I also wish to inform relevant policy makers of the key outcomes and recommendations of this national, large-scale, in-depth research of the lived experiences, realities and challenges of those leading and managing the SEN provision in Irish mainstream primary schools. This is necessary to support the formal recognition and further development of the SENCO role in Ireland to achieve best outcomes for all learners in mainstream primary schools.

8.7 Concluding Remarks

This large-scale sequential research has provided in-depth insight into the realities, context and profile of SENCOs in Irish primary schools. A pragmatic paradigm underpinned by interpretivism was adopted in this study, which was framed within Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory. This approach led to the utilisation of a mixed-methods research design, which involved a national survey and semi-structured interviews to answer the research questions from the perspectives of both SENCOs and Principals. Given the lack of large-scale national research on the SENCO role, this research is timely, addresses a significant research gap and has provided numerous recommendations for policy and practice.

This research has revealed the influential and instrumental role that SENCOs play in Irish mainstream primary schools in leading and managing inclusive special education across the school's microsystem. SENCOs are knowledgeable, experienced and are highly respected and trusted by all members of the microsystem and it is the culture of collaboration and support from colleagues and Principals that facilitates them in their role. SENCOs now occupy a space where the majority of them are embedded within the leadership structures of the school and are responsible for not only SEN provision, but the development and implementation of school-wide initiatives and inclusive pedagogies. They are passionate and committed professionals who use their leadership capacity to advocate for pupils with additional needs to optimise best outcomes for all. There is a substantial mismatch evident in Ireland as policy guidance from the exosystem does not reflect the realities visible on the ground or the authentic SENCO voice represented in this research. The SENCO role is not acknowledged or recognised in any policy documents, and this is having a cascading effect on the experiences of SENCOs in the microsystem resulting in challenges for SENCO role enactment. Principals are calling out for policy makers to formalise the SENCO role as it is an inherent position within the management structure of the school and imperative in supporting them in creating an inclusive, fair and equitable education setting for all within their microsystem.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Ethical Approval

MIREC-5, Created November 2021



MIREC-5

Research Ethics Committee

MIREC Final Decision Form

APPLICATION NUMBER:

A22-045

1. PROJECT TITLE

Leadership for Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools - An Exploration of the Role of the Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO)

2. APPLICANT

Name:	Sarah Gallagher
Department / Centre / Other:	EPISE
Position:	Postgraduate Researcher

3. DECISION OF MIREC CHAIR (✓)

☐	Ethical clearance through MIREC is not required and therefore the applicant need take no further action in this regard.
☒	Ethical clearance is required and is hereby granted by the Chair without need for referral to the MIREC committee.
☐	Ethical clearance for a funding application or a similar purpose is granted by the Chair <i>pro tem</i> without need for referral to the MIREC committee. However, the applicant must subsequently seek ethical clearance from MIREC prior to embarking on any related project work involving human participants or their data.
☐	Ethical clearance is granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.
☐	Ethical clearance is not granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.

4. REASON(S) FOR DECISION

I have reviewed this application and I am satisfied it meets MIREC requirements. It is, therefore, approved.

5. SIGNATURE OF MIREC CHAIR

Name (Print):	Dr Marie Griffin
Signature:	
Date:	6 th October 2022

APPENDIX 2: Survey

SENCO survey

Start of Block: Block 5



Information Sheet Participant Information Sheet

Study Title: Leadership for Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools: An Exploration of the Role of the Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO).

Who is conducting the study? This research is being conducted by Sarah Gallagher, a PhD student at Mary Immaculate College (Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education). The research is being supervised by Dr Johanna Fitzgerald.

What is the study about? The study seeks to explore SENCOs' perspectives on the role of the SENCO, identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for professional learning for SENCOs. The study will explore the tasks and responsibilities of the SENCO, barriers and facilitators that influence SENCOs in fulfilling their role and the extent that SENCOs lead and coordinate strategic planning of school-wide inclusive practices. **This initial phase of the research involves a questionnaire which is being distributed to SENCOs.** Following this, Phase 2 will involve interviews to investigate common themes identified in Phase 1. SENCOs and Principals will be the participants in Phase 2.

Why is it important? Irish policy does not include a clear definition of the SENCO role, and research into the role is scarce within Ireland. The roles and responsibilities of the SENCO vary internationally. In light of recent changes to the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model, it is important to explore the impact of these changes in school policy and practice and in particular the impact on SENCOs or teachers involved in coordination of provision in schools. It is hoped that this research will contribute to policy and practice by giving an insight into SENCOs' and Principals' perceptions of the role, and provide some future directions to support schools in responding to the needs to children with diverse needs

Who can participate? Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (those responsible for the coordination of SEN provision in schools) in primary schools will participate in Phase 1.

What will I have to do? You will be asked to complete a short questionnaire which is tailored to your role as a SENCO. The questionnaire will ask about your experiences and perceptions of your SENCO role.

How long will it take? Completing the questionnaire online should take no more than 15-20 minutes.

Can I withdraw from the study? Your participation is voluntary and you are under no obligation to participate. You can withdraw at any point before or during your

participation in the study without providing any reason and without any consequences. It will not be possible to withdraw your data afterwards. This is because all data is anonymised and it is not possible to link anonymised data with individual participants.

How will my information be used? You will not be asked to provide your name or any other identifying information. The researcher will have custody of data. The supervisor may need occasional access to the data. The study will adhere to all relevant requirements in terms of data protection, GDPR, anonymity and confidentiality. All data will be anonymised as soon as possible, and anonymised data may be retained indefinitely as required by the researcher.

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This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980
E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie



Consent Form

Participant Informed Consent Form

Study Title: Leadership for Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools: An Exploration of the Role of the Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO).

1. I have read and understand the participant information sheet.
2. I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for.
3. I understand that I am agreeing to participate in Phase 1 of this project.
4. I am fully aware of all of the procedures involving myself, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.
5. I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving any reason.
6. I am aware that my results will be kept confidential.

If you consent to take part in this study, please indicate this by selecting Yes below

☐ Yes (4)

☐ No (5)

End of Block: Block 5

Start of Block: Section 1: General School Context



Section 1

Thank you for commencing this survey.

Your SENCO voice is vital to this research on the SENCO role.

Section 1: General School Context

Page Break

Q1.1 What is your school type? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Denominational National School (1)
- ☐ Community National School (2)
- ☐ Educate Together (3)
- ☐ Gaelscoil (4)
- ☐ Private (5)
- ☐ Other (6)

Display This Question:

If What is your school type? (Select all that apply) = Other

Q1.2 Please specify 'other' from the previous question.

—

Q1.3 How would you describe your school's catchment area?

- ☐ Urban (city/ suburbs) (1)
 - ☐ Urban (town) (2)
 - ☐ Urban and rural mixed (e.g. town and surrounding countryside) (3)
 - ☐ Rural (4)
-

Q1.4 Is your school single-sex or co-educational?

- ☐ Boys only (1)
- ☐ Females only (2)
- ☐ Mixed boys and girls (3)

Q1.5 Approximately how many pupils attend your school?

- ☐ Under 100 (3)
 - ☐ 100-200 (4)
 - ☐ 200-300 (5)
 - ☐ 300-400 (6)
 - ☐ Over 400 (7)
-

Q1.6 What type(s) of classes are in your school?

- ☐ Mainstream (1)
 - ☐ Mainstream with special class(es) (2)
-

Display This Question:

If What type(s) of classes are in your school? = Mainstream with special class(es)

Q1.7 How many special classes are in your school?

- ☐ 1 (4)
- ☐ 2 (5)
- ☐ 3 (6)
- ☐ 4 (7)
- ☐ 5 (8)

Q1.8 Does your school have DEIS status?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Display This Question:

If Does your school have DEIS status? = Yes

Q1.9 What DEIS band is your school in?

- ☐ DEIS Urban Band 1 (4)
- ☐ DEIS Urban Band 2 (5)
- ☐ DEIS Rural Band (6)

End of Block: Section 1: General School Context

Start of Block: Section 2: SEN Staff and SEN Provision

JS

Section 2

Section 2: SEN Staff and SEN Provision

Q2.1 How many **full-time** Special Education Teachers (SETs) are there in your school?

- ☐ 0-2 (4)
- ☐ 3-4 (5)
- ☐ 5-6 (6)
- ☐ 7-8 (7)
- ☐ Over 8 (8)

Q2.2 How many **part-time** SETs are in your school?

- ☐ 0-2 (4)
- ☐ 3-4 (5)
- ☐ 5-6 (6)
- ☐ 7-8 (7)
- ☐ Over 8 (8)

Q2.3 How many **full-time** Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) are in your school?

- ☐ 0-2 (4)
 - ☐ 3-4 (5)
 - ☐ 5-6 (6)
 - ☐ 7-8 (7)
 - ☐ Over 8 (8)
-

Q2.4 How many **part-time** SNAs are in your school?

- ☐ 0-2 (4)
- ☐ 3-4 (5)
- ☐ 5-6 (6)
- ☐ 7-8 (7)
- ☐ Over 8 (8)

Q2.5 How many Special Class Teachers are in your school?

- ☐ 0 (4)
- ☐ 1 (5)
- ☐ 2 (6)
- ☐ 3 (7)
- ☐ Over 3 (8)

Q2.6 Do you have a Home School Liaison Teacher in your school?

- ☐ Yes (4)
- ☐ No (5)

Q2.7 Is there a SEN support team (i.e. core team responsible for SEN provision) in your school?

- ☐ Yes (1)
 - ☐ No (2)
-

Q2.8 Are the following people involved in the SEN support team in your school?

	Yes (2)	No (3)
SENCO (1)	☐	☐
Special Education Teachers (2)	☐	☐
Special Class Teacher (9)	☐	☐
Class Teachers (3)	☐	☐
SNA (4)	☐	☐
Principal (5)	☐	☐
Deputy Principal (6)	☐	☐
Home School Liaison Teacher (7)	☐	☐

Q2.9 How often do these people meet?

- ☐ Daily (1)
- ☐ Weekly (2)
- ☐ Monthly (3)
- ☐ Other (4)

Display This Question:

If How often do these people meet? = Other

Q2.10 Please specify as you selected other in the previous question.

—

Q2.11 Is the meeting time part of the teachers' expected working hours?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Q2.12 Do systems/ procedures exist for collaboration between SEN staff and class teachers outside of SEN support meetings (e.g. Croke Park time, scheduled planning time)?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Q2.13 Approximately what percentage of pupils are in receipt of SEN support (i.e. pupils that have a school support or school support plus plan) in your school?

☐ 0% to 10% (4)

☐ 11% to 20% (5)

☐ 21% to 30% (6)

☐ 31% to 40% (7)

☐ 41% to 50% (8)

☐ Over 50% (9)

Q2.14 To what extent does your school apply the Continuum of Support to organise SEN provision?

☐ Always (1)

☐ Most of the time (2)

☐ Sometimes (3)

☐ Very seldom (4)

☐ Never (5)

Q2.15 Does the school have a written policy on provision for pupils with SEN?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Q2.16 Which of the following procedures are used in your school **to identify pupils that need additional support?**

	Yes (2)	No (3)
Below a set percentile on in-school standardised tests (1)	☐	☐
Recommendation of class teacher (2)	☐	☐
Class based test (3)	☐	☐
External professional report (e.g. psychologist, OT, SLT) (4)	☐	☐
Special education teacher's assessment (5)	☐	☐
Pre-school report on transition (6)	☐	☐
Parental/ Guardian concern (7)	☐	☐

Q2.17 Are there procedures for determining how long SEN support is provided?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Q2.18 Who decides when support is terminated? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ SENCO (1)
- ☐ Principal (2)
- ☐ SET (3)
- ☐ Class teacher (4)
- ☐ SEN team (5)
- ☐ Parent/ Guardian (6)
- ☐ Other (please specify in the next question) (7)

Display This Question:

If Who decides when support is terminated? (Select all that apply) = Other (please specify in the next question)

Q2.19 Please specify 'other' from the previous question.

—

Q2.20 Does your school currently devise Student Support Plans for pupils with additional needs?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q2.21 Are the following people involved in devising the Student Support Plans in your school?

	Yes (2)	No (3)
Class teacher (1)	☐	☐
SET (2)	☐	☐
Special Class Teacher (13)	☐	☐
Parent/ Guardian (3)	☐	☐
SENCO (4)	☐	☐
Pupil (5)	☐	☐
SNA (6)	☐	☐
Principal (7)	☐	☐
Psychologist (8)	☐	☐
Occupational Therapist (9)	☐	☐
Speech and Language Teacher (10)	☐	☐
Visiting Teacher (11)	☐	☐

Page Break



Q2.22 Please rank the **top 4** most frequently used **types of SEN provision** in your school (1 = Most frequently used, 4 = Least frequently used). Please review all options before ranking. Rank 4 only.

- ☐ Withdrawal for individual instruction (1)
- ☐ Withdrawal for group instruction (2)
- ☐ In-class teaching (3)
- ☐ Occasional advice from SET (4)
- ☐ Support of visiting teacher (7)
- ☐ Special class part time, mainstream class part time (5)
- ☐ Special class full time (6)
- ☐ Other (please specify in the next question) (9)

Display This Question:

If Please rank the top 4 most frequently used types of SEN provision in your school (1 = Most frequently used, 4 = Least frequently used). Please review all options before ranking. Rank 4 only. [Other (please specify in the next question)] Is Not Empty

Q2.23 Please specify 'other' from the previous question.

—

End of Block: Section 2: SEN Staff and SEN Provision

Start of Block: Section 3: You and Your SENCO Role



Section 3

Past the half-way mark. Thank you.

Section 3: You and Your SENCO Role

Page Break

Q3.1 What is your gender?

☐ Female (1)

☐ Male (2)

Q3.2 How many years teaching experience do you have?

☐ 5 or less (4)

☐ 6-10 (5)

☐ 11-15 (6)

☐ 16-20 (7)

☐ 21 years + (8)

Q3.3 How many year's experience do you have in SEN?

☐ 5 or less (4)

☐ 6-10 (5)

☐ 11-15 (6)

☐ 16-20 (7)

☐ 21 years + (8)

Q3.4 How many year's experience do you have as a SENCO?

☐ 5 or less (4)

☐ 6-10 (5)

☐ 11-15 (6)

☐ 16-20 (7)

☐ 21 years + (8)

Q3.5 Which of the following best describes your current role?

- ☐ SET and SENCO (2)
- ☐ SENCO (full-time) (1)
- ☐ Principal and SENCO (3)
- ☐ Deputy Principal and SENCO (4)
- ☐ Other (please specify in the next question) (5)

Display This Question:

If Which of the following best describes your current role? = Other (please specify in the next question)

Q3.6 Please specify 'other' from the previous question.

Q3.7 What is your highest third-level qualification?

- ☐ Degree (4)
- ☐ Postgraduate Diploma (3)
- ☐ Master's (2)
- ☐ PhD (1)
- ☐ Other (please specify in the next question) (5)

Display This Question:

If What is your highest third-level qualification? = Other (please specify in the next question)

Q3.8 Please specify 'other' from the previous question.

Q3.9

Which of the following third-level qualifications in Special Education have you completed? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Master's in Special Education (1)
- ☐ Postgraduate Diploma in Special Education (2)
- ☐ Other (please specify in the next question) (4)
- ☐ I have not undertaken any postgraduate qualifications in Special Education (3)

Display This Question:

If Which of the following third-level qualifications in Special Education have you completed? (Selec... = Other (please specify in the next question)

Q3.10 Please specify 'other' from the previous question.

—

Display This Question:

If Which of the following third-level qualifications in Special Education have you completed? (Selec... = Postgraduate Diploma in Special Education

Q3.11 Do you think that the Postgraduate Diploma in Special Education prepares SENCOs for the SENCO role?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q3.12 Do you have a post of responsibility to coordinate special education provision in your school?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Page Break

Display This Question:

If Do you have a post of responsibility to coordinate special education provision in your school? = Yes

Q3.13 Which post do you hold?

- ☐ Principal (1)
- ☐ Deputy Principal (2)
- ☐ Assistant Principal I (3)
- ☐ Assistant Principal II (4)
- ☐ Other (please specify in the next question) (5)

Display This Question:

If Which post do you hold? = Other (please specify in the next question)

Q3.14 Please specify 'other' from the previous question.

—

Display This Question:

If Do you have a post of responsibility to coordinate special education provision in your school? = Yes

Q3.15 Please select if this post of responsibility is a full post or if your SENCO duties form part of a post of responsibility with other responsibilities.

- ☐ Full post of responsibility (1)
- ☐ Part of a post of responsibility (2)

Q3.16 Are you part of any communities of practice/professional learning networks relevant to your role as a SENCO, e.g. SENCO Forum?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Display This Question:

If Are you part of any communities of practice/professional learning networks relevant to your role... = Yes

Q3.17 What format is used for these community of practice meetings?

☐ Face-to-face meetings (1)

☐ Online meetings (2)

☐ Blended approach (mixture of face-to-face and online meetings) (3)

Q3.18 In your opinion, please **indicate the relative importance** of the following SENCO roles and responsibilities.

	Very important (1)	Important (2)	Somewhat important (3)	Not particularly important (4)	Not important at all (5)
Timetabling SEN support. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Monitoring of pupil progress and determining length of support provision. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Leading and implementing whole-school SEN initiatives and interventions. (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Leading and developing SEN plan, policies and procedures. (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Collaborating and meeting with the Senior Leadership Team. (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Co-ordinating the SEN Team. (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Liaising with parents. (8)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Liaising and collaborating with outside agencies. (9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Collaborating with class teachers. (10)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Supporting class teachers with Classroom Support Plans or Checklists. (29)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Directing the work of SNAs in the school. (11)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Arranging standardised tests, diagnostic tests and/or cognitive assessments. (12)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Advocating on behalf of students. (13)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Identifying pupils with additional needs. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Developing and co-ordinating the Student Support Plan process. (14)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Co-ordinating and engaging in Student Support Plan meetings. (15)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Supporting and co-ordinating pupils' transitions to and from primary school. (16)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Identifying relevant CPD and providing CPD to staff. (17)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Co-ordinating pupil records. (19)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Identifying and allocating SEN resources and materials. (20)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Applying for resources, e.g. SET allocations, SNA allocations, etc. (21)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Withdrawal of pupils for individual instruction. (22)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Withdrawal of pupils for small group instruction. (23)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Providing in-class support within mainstream classes. (24)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Providing in-class support within special classes. (25)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q3.19 Is there anything that has **enabled you or facilitated you** to execute your SENCO role effectively? Please list relevant items

—

Q3.20 Is there anything that has **acted as a barrier** to the effective execution of your SENCO role? Please list relevant items.

—

End of Block: Section 3: You and Your SENCO Role

Start of Block: Section 4: Working with the Senior Leadership Team.



Section 4

Section 4: Working with the Senior Leadership Team

Page Break

Q4.1 Are you part of the Senior Leadership Team in your school?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Q4.2 How closely does the Senior Leadership Team work with the SEN team?

☐ Very closely (1)

☐ Closely (2)

☐ Somewhat closely (3)

☐ Not particularly closely (4)

☐ Not closely at all (5)

Q4.3 How **closely have you worked** with the Senior Leadership Team in undertaking the roles below?

	Very closely (1)	Closely (2)	Somewhat closely (3)	Not particularly closely (4)	Not closely at all (5)
Identifying and keeping records of pupils who need support at Level 2 or 3 of the Continuum of Support. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Organising early intervention and prevention. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Monitoring, recording and reviewing pupils' outcomes at group, class and whole-school level. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Allocating resources and timetabling for pupils with SEN. (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Overseeing a whole-school approach to assessment and screening to identify needs and to guide the allocation of appropriate supports. (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ensuring effective engagement with pre-school and post-primary schools to support the transition of pupils with SEN. (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Facilitating the CPD of all teachers in relation to the education of pupils with SEN. (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ensuring that the school SEN plan, policies and procedures are agreed and implemented. (8)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Consulting and liaising with relevant external bodies and agencies, such as NEPS. (9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Ensuring that systems are in place for effective sharing of relevant information on students' needs with the SEN team and all teachers. (10)

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Facilitating meetings between parents and various support services. (11)

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Leading and managing the SEN team and school supports, e.g. SNAs and Home School Liaison Teachers. (12)

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Q4.4 From your experience, please indicate below how the **SEN Team** work with the **Senior Leadership Team** in your school.

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
Senior Leadership and the SEN Team have shared goals and priorities regarding SEN provision. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The SEN Team has a positive working relationship with Senior Leadership. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The SENCO/ SEN Team have sufficient time to work with Senior Leadership. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Senior Leadership and the SENCO/ SEN Team have useful skills which we can combine. (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Senior Leadership is involved with and interested in SEN provision. (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Relevant CPD helps the SENCO/ SEN Team to work effectively with Senior Leadership. (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My school has effective systems and procedures for linking with the Senior Leadership Team. (9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel that my role as SENCO has status and is respected in the school. (10)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Senior Leadership respects and listens to my ideas for change. (11)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

End of Block: Section 4: Working with the Senior Leadership Team.

Start of Block: Section 5: Professional Learning



Section 5

Last Section. Thank you.

Section 5: Professional Learning

Q5.1 Were you a SENCO prior to the introduction of the Special Education Teaching Allocation Model (New Model) in 2017?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Display This Question:

If Were you a SENCO prior to the introduction of the Special Education Teaching Allocation Model (Ne... = Yes

Q5.2 To what extent has your SENCO role changed as a result of the introduction of the Special Education Teaching Allocation Model (New Model) in 2017?

- ☐ Significantly changed (1)
 - ☐ Changed (2)
 - ☐ Somewhat changed (3)
 - ☐ Not particularly changed (4)
 - ☐ Not changed at all (5)
-

Q5.3 Have you ever had any in-service/ professional learning related to the implementation of the Special Education Teaching Allocation Model (New Model)?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Display This Question:

If Have you ever had any in-service/ professional learning related to the implementation of the Spec... = Yes

Q5.4 If yes, which of the following types of in-service/ professional learning have you attended? (Select all that apply)

☐ Approved day release course on the new model (in school hours) (1)

☐ NCSE school based support on the new model (2)

☐ Local Education Centre course on the new model (out of school hours) (3)

☐ Online/ e-learning course on the new model (4)

☐ Network meetings with other teachers on the new model (5)

☐ Attending conferences on the new model (6)

☐ Meetings with NEPS in relation to the new model (8)

☐ Other (please specify in the next question) (7)

Display This Question:

If If yes, which of the following types of in-service/ professional learning have you attended? (Sel... = Other (please specify in the next question)

Q5.5 Please specify 'other' from the previous question.

Q5.6 Please **rate the importance** of the following components for a **postgraduate level programme of professional learning for SENCOs**.

	Very important (1)	Important (2)	Somewhat important (3)	Not particularly important (4)	Not important at all (5)
Leadership and management in education. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Developing skills in collaborating with others, e.g teachers and the senior leadership team. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Developing alternative curriculum for students with SEN, e.g. evidence-based strategies. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Teaching strategies for students with SEN. (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Identifying pupils whose needs require support at Level 2 or 3 on the Continuum of Support. (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Effective allocation and timetabling of SEN provision. (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Co-ordinating SEN teams and school supports, e.g. SNAs. (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Information, communication and assistive technology. (8)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Administration, record keeping, and digital literacy skills. (9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Identifying relevant CPD and providing CPD to staff. (10)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Mentoring and coaching of SEN staff. (11)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Supporting pupils' transitions to and from primary school. (12)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

The Law and Special Educational Needs. (13)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
School policy and planning in SEN. (14)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Working with parents of children with SEN. (15)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Working with external agencies/ support services for SEN, e.g. Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy. (16)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Establishing and co-ordinating special classes. (17)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Contemporary issues in inclusive and special education. (18)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Inclusion of pupils with SEN into mainstream classes. (19)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Standardised tests, diagnostic tests and cognitive assessments (paper-based and online). (20)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Monitoring of pupil progress. (21)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Learning difficulties: Types, characteristics and assessment. (22)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Psychological assessments: Types, characteristics and interpretation. (23)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Co-teaching: Types and effective implementation. (24)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Inclusive policies. (26)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Theoretical concepts
relating to inclusive
and special
education. (27)

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Q5.7 From the list below choose 5 of your top preferences for the **type of Teacher Professional Learning (i.e. CPD)** needed for the SENCO role. Please review all options before choosing. **Choose 5 only.**

- ☐ Block release to attend a college/ university programme (1)
- ☐ Self-selected SEN related postgraduate programmes (e.g. Graduate Diploma, Master's) (6)
- ☐ Communities of practice/ professional learning networks, e.g. SENCO Forum (2)
- ☐ Opportunity to observe experienced colleagues in their role (3)
- ☐ NCSE school based support (4)
- ☐ Local Education Centre course (5)
- ☐ Attending conferences (7)
- ☐ Summer courses (8)
- ☐ Relevant day release courses (in school hours) (9)
- ☐ Relevant online courses and webinars (10)
- ☐ Combination from this list (e.g. postgraduate programme & CoP) (11)

Display This Question:

If From the list below choose 5 of your top preferences for the type of Teacher Professional Learning... = Combination from this list (e.g. attendance at postgraduate programme and community of practice)

Q5.8 As you ranked the combination option from the previous question, can you please detail your preferred combination?

Q5.9 Do you think there is a need for a SENCO specific third-level postgraduate programme?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

APPENDIX 3: Cover Email – Phase 1 (Pilot)



Mary Immaculate College

A Chara,

I hope this email finds you well. I am a PhD student in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. I am currently completing research as part of my doctoral thesis. The research is being supervised by Dr Johanna Fitzgerald (Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education).

My research is exploring SENCOs' and Principals' perspectives on the role of the SENCO, identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for professional learning for SENCOs. The study will explore the tasks and responsibilities of the SENCO, barriers and facilitators that influence SENCOs in fulfilling their role and the extent that SENCOs lead and coordinate strategic planning of school-wide inclusive practices. It is hoped that this research will contribute to policy and practice in this area.

As part of my study, I am designing a questionnaire (20-25 minutes) for SENCOs which asks about their experiences and perceptions of the SENCO role. Before I distribute the questionnaire, I would like to pilot it by asking a small number of SENCOs to complete the questionnaire and provide feedback to me about the clarity of the questions, completion time, questions which should be included/omitted etc. I have attached the link to the questionnaires below, along with an information sheet giving further details about my research; please contact me if you have any questions.

I would really appreciate if the SENCO, i.e. the person responsible for SEN provision (includes the Principal if this he/she/they are the SENCO), in your school would consider participating in this pilot.

Kind regards,

Sarah Gallagher:

SENCO questionnaire link:

Researcher Contact Details:

Sarah Gallagher
Sarah.gallagher@mic.ul.ie

Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Johanna Fitzgerald
Johanna.Fitzgerald@mic.ul.ie
+353 61 204517

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

APPENDIX 4: Information Sheet – Phase 1 (Pilot)



Mary Immaculate College

Study Title: Leadership for inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools: An Exploration of the Role of the Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO).

Who is conducting the study? This research is being conducted by Sarah Gallagher, a PhD student at Mary Immaculate College (Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education). The research is being supervised by Dr Johanna Fitzgerald.

What is the study about? The study seeks to explore SENCOs' perspectives on the role of the SENCO, identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for professional learning for SENCOs. The study will explore the tasks and responsibilities of the SENCO, barriers and facilitators that influence SENCOs in fulfilling their role and the extent that SENCOs lead and coordinate strategic planning of school-wide inclusive practices. This Pilot for Phase 1 is being carried out in order to refine a questionnaire which will then be distributed to participants (SENCOs). Following this, Phase 2 will involve interviews to investigate in depth common themes identified in Phase 1. SENCOs and Principals will be the participants in Phase 2.

Why is it important? Irish policy does not include a clear definition of the SENCO role, and research into the role is scarce within Ireland. The roles and responsibilities of the SENCO vary internationally. In light of recent changes to the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model, it is important to explore the impact of these changes in school policy and practice and in particular the impact on SENCOs or teachers involved in coordination of provision in schools. It is hoped that this research will contribute to policy and practice by giving an insight into SENCOs' and Principals' perceptions of the role, and provide some future directions to support schools in responding to the needs to children with diverse needs.

Who can participate? Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (those who are responsible for the coordination of SEN provision in schools) in primary schools will participate in Phase 1.

What will I have to do? A link to the questionnaire will be emailed to you, which will include informed consent. You will be asked to complete an online questionnaire. The final section of the questionnaire will ask you to give feedback about the questionnaire, e.g. clarity of questions, ease of completion, areas for improvement, questions which should be included or omitted.

How long will it take? Completing the questionnaire and feedback should take no more than 20-25 minutes.

Can I withdraw from the study? Your participation is voluntary and you are under no obligation to participate. You can withdraw at any point before or during your participation in the study without providing any reason and without any consequences.

How will my information be used? Your feedback will be used to improve the questionnaire before it is distributed. Any feedback which you provide will be anonymised. The researcher will have custody of data. The supervisor may need occasional access to the data. The study will adhere to all relevant requirements in terms of data protection, GDPR, anonymity and confidentiality. All data will be anonymised as soon as possible which may be retained indefinitely as required by the researcher.

Researcher Contact Details:

Sarah Gallagher
Sarah.gallagher@mic.ul.ie

Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Johanna Fitzgerald
Johanna.Fitzgerald@mic.ul.ie
+353 61 204517

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

APPENDIX 5: Informed Consent Form – Phase 1 (Pilot)



Mary Immaculate College

Study Title: Leadership for Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools: An Exploration of the Role of the Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO).

1. I have read and understand the participant information sheet.
2. I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for.
3. I understand that I am agreeing to participate in the Pilot for Phase 1 of this project.
4. I am fully aware of all of the procedures involving myself, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.
5. I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving any reason.
6. I am aware that my results will be kept confidential.

Note: This statement will appear at the beginning of the questionnaire. Participants can indicate their consent to participate using a yes/no tick box.

APPENDIX 6: Cover Email – Phase 1



Mary Immaculate College

A Chara,

I hope this email finds you well. I am a PhD student in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. I am currently completing research as part of my doctoral thesis. The research is being supervised by Dr Johanna Fitzgerald (Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education).

My research is exploring SENCOs' and Principals' perspectives on the role of the SENCO, identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for professional learning for SENCOs. The study will explore the tasks and responsibilities of the SENCO, barriers and facilitators that influence SENCOs in fulfilling their role and the extent that SENCOs lead and coordinate strategic planning of school-wide inclusive practices. It is hoped that this research will contribute to policy and practice in this area.

As part of my study, I am asking SENCOs to complete a questionnaire (20-25 minutes) which asks about their experiences and perceptions of the SENCO role. I have attached the link to the questionnaire below, along with an information sheet giving further details about my research; please contact me if you have any questions.

I would really appreciate if the SENCO, i.e. the person responsible for SEN provision (includes the Principal if this he/she/they are the SENCO), in your school would consider participating in this pilot. In addition, if the SENCO is willing to take part in Phase 2 of this research which involves engagement in a semi-structured interview (duration 45 to 60 minutes) on their experiences of the SENCO role they can express their interest by completing the Express of Interest Survey form below.

Kind regards,

Sarah Gallagher

SENCO questionnaire link:

Phase 2 Expression of Interest link:

Researcher Contact Details:

Sarah Gallagher

Sarah.gallagher@mic.ul.ie

Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Johanna Fitzgerald

Johanna.Fitzgerald@mic.ul.ie

+353 61 204517

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

APPENDIX 7: Information Sheet – Information Sheet (Phase 1)



Mary Immaculate College

Study Title: Leadership for Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools: An Exploration of the Role of the Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO).

Who is conducting the study? This research is being conducted by Sarah Gallagher, a PhD student at Mary Immaculate College (Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education). The research is being supervised by Dr Johanna Fitzgerald.

What is the study about? The study seeks to explore SENCOs' perspectives on the role of the SENCO, identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for professional learning for SENCOs. The study will explore the tasks and responsibilities of the SENCO, barriers and facilitators that influence SENCOs in fulfilling their role and the extent that SENCOs lead and coordinate strategic planning of school-wide inclusive practices. **This initial phase of the research involves a questionnaire which is being distributed to SENCOs.** Following this, Phase 2 will involve interviews to investigate common themes identified in Phase 1. SENCOs and Principals will be the participants in Phase 2.

Why is it important? Irish policy does not include a clear definition of the SENCO role, and research into the role is scarce within Ireland. The roles and responsibilities of the SENCO vary internationally. In light of recent changes to the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model, it is important to explore the impact of these changes in school policy and practice and in particular the impact on SENCOs or teachers involved in coordination of provision in schools. It is hoped that this research will contribute to policy and practice by giving an insight into SENCOs' and Principals' perceptions of the role, and provide some future directions to support schools in responding to the needs to children with diverse needs

Who can participate? Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (those responsible for the coordination of SEN provision in schools) in primary schools will participate in Phase 1.

What will I have to do? You will be asked to complete a short questionnaire which is tailored to your role as a SENCO. The questionnaire will ask about your experiences and perceptions of your SENCO role.

How long will it take? Completing the questionnaire online should take no more than 20-25 minutes.

Can I withdraw from the study? Your participation is voluntary and you are under no obligation to participate. You can withdraw at any point before or during your participation in the study without providing any reason and without any consequences.

It will not be possible to withdraw your data afterwards. This is because all data is anonymised and it is not possible to link anonymised data with individual participants.

How will my information be used? You will not be asked to provide your name or any other identifying information. The researcher will have custody of data. The supervisor may need occasional access to the data. The study will adhere to all relevant requirements in terms of data protection, GDPR, anonymity and confidentiality. All data will be anonymised as soon as possible, and anonymised data may be retained indefinitely as required by the researcher.

Researcher Contact Details:

Sarah Gallagher
Sarah.gallagher@mic.ul.ie

Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Johanna Fitzgerald
Johanna.Fitzgerald@mic.ul.ie
+353 61 204517

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

APPENDIX 8: Informed Consent Form – Phase 1



Mary Immaculate College

Study Title: Leadership for Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools: An Exploration of the Role of the Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO).

1. I have read and understand the participant information sheet.
2. I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for.
3. I understand that I am agreeing to participate in Phase 1 of this project.
4. I am fully aware of all of the procedures involving myself, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.
5. I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving any reason.
6. I am aware that my results will be kept confidential.

Note: This statement will appear at the beginning of the questionnaire. Participants can indicate their consent to participate using a yes/no tick box.

APPENDIX 9: Cover Email – Phase 1 (SENCO social media groups)



Mary Immaculate College

A Chara,

I am a PhD student in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. I am currently completing research as part of my doctoral thesis. The research is being supervised by Dr Johanna Fitzgerald (Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education).

My research is exploring SENCOs' and Principals' perspectives on the role of the SENCO, identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for professional learning for SENCOs. The study will explore the tasks and responsibilities of the SENCO, barriers and facilitators that influence SENCOs in fulfilling their role and the extent that SENCOs lead and coordinate strategic planning of school-wide inclusive practices. It is hoped that this research will contribute to policy and practice in this area.

As part of my study, I am asking SENCOs to complete a questionnaire (20-25 minutes) which asks about their experiences and perceptions of the SENCO role. The questionnaire will be live until [date will be inserted here]. I have attached the link to the questionnaire below, along with an information sheet giving further details about my research; please contact me if you have any questions, either here or by email (Sarah.Gallagher@micstudent.mic.ul.ie). My supervisor is Dr Johanna Fitzgerald (Johanna.Fitzgerald@mic.ul.ie).

I would really appreciate if you would consider posting the link to the questionnaire on your page.

Kind regards,

Sarah Gallagher.

SENCO questionnaire link:

Researcher Contact Details:

Sarah Gallagher

Sarah.gallagher@mic.ul.ie

Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Johanna Fitzgerald

Johanna.Fitzgerald@mic.ul.ie

+353 61 204517

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

APPENDIX 10: Cover Email – Phase 1 (SENCO Forums, Irish Learning Support Association)



Mary Immaculate College

A Chara,

I hope this email finds you well. I am a PhD student in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. I am currently completing research as part of my doctoral thesis. The research is being supervised by Dr Johanna Fitzgerald (Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education).

My research is exploring SENCOs' and Principals' perspectives on the role of the SENCO, identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for professional learning for SENCOs. The study will explore the tasks and responsibilities of the SENCO, barriers and facilitators that influence SENCOs in fulfilling their role and the extent that SENCOs lead and coordinate strategic planning of school-wide inclusive practices. It is hoped that this research will contribute to policy and practice in this area.

As part of my study, I am asking SENCOs to complete a questionnaire (20-25 minutes) which asks about their experiences and perceptions of the SENCO role. The questionnaire will be live until [date will be inserted here]. I have attached the link to the questionnaire below, along with an information sheet giving further details about my research; please contact me if you have any questions.

I would really appreciate if you would consider circulating this questionnaire to your members.

Kind regards,

Sarah Gallagher

SENCO questionnaire link:

Researcher Contact Details:

Sarah Gallagher

Sarah.gallagher@mic.ul.ie

Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Johanna Fitzgerald

Johanna.Fitzgerald@mic.ul.ie

+353 61 204517

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

APPENDIX 11: Interview Schedules – Phase 2

SENCO Interview Schedule

General

1. Tell me about your teaching experience in general- qualifications (specific qualification in SEN).
 - (a). How long are you working in this school?
 - (b). How many years of experience do you have in SEN?
2. How many years' experience do you have as a SENCO? How did you become SENCO and why do you do the job?

School Context and SEN Provision

3. To get a picture of the school context can I ask how many pupils are receiving SEN supports in your school? How many SETs are in your school? How many SNA are in the school? Do you have a special class in the school? Do you have a HSL?
4. Tell me about the ethos of the school- Is there an inclusive ethos? How is this evident?
5. In your opinion, what are the key benefits of including pupils with SEN in your school?
6. Do you think there are any challenges to including pupils with SEN in your school?
7. In general, do you think staff are supportive to including children with SEN.
8. Do you use the Continuum of Support in your school? What does that look like? Can you give some examples of the kind of thing that is happening at each level on the continuum (classroom support, school support, school support plus)?

Possible prompts here are: What type of provision/ supports are available/ screening assessment, how is progress monitored or measured? Does your school use SSPs?

9. In the last few years, the new model of resource allocation has brought about many changes. What has been the impact on practice in your school in light of these policy changes?

SENCO Role and Responsibilities

10. Tell me about your role as SENCO. What do you do? Do you hold a post of responsibility? Tell me about that post? How many years do you have the post?
11. In phase One (the survey), SENCOs rated the importance of various SENCO roles and responsibilities, the top 3 were, leading and Implementing whole-school initiatives, number two was identifying pupils with additional needs and number 3 was coordinating the SEN team, in your opinion what are the most important roles and responsibilities and why?
12. Are there other duties you think you should have, or are there responsibilities that you have that you feel you should not have?
13. Do you see yourself primarily as a SEN coordinator or as a Special Education Teacher or something else? What is guiding this perception?
14. How do others in the school view your role?
15. Do you feel confident in your role? Why/ Why not?
16. The survey indicated that 71% of SENCOS said that their role changed due to the new model. Has your particular role changed in anyway due to policy changes- Have changes in policy impacted in anyway on your role?
17. In Phase One (the survey), the area of 'support and collaboration of colleagues', and professional learning came through as factors that effectively enabled the SENCO role. In your opinion, have you experienced this and if so can you give me an example of how these factors or others enable your role. Are there any other factors that facilitate your role?
18. Are there other supports that would support you in fulfilling the SENCO role?
19. The survey identified that the main barriers to effective execution of the role where time, having multiple roles and inadequate support from external professional services. Have you encountered any of these barriers or others, can you tell me how they have impacted your role?

Working with the Senior Leadership Team

20. Would you consider yourself to be a leader of SEN in your school? Why? Why not?
21. In your opinion can you tell me what leadership in SEN looks like? To what extent do you as SENCO lead and coordinate the strategic planning of SEN provision in your school?
22. The survey indicated that the SENCO has insufficient time to work with Senior Leadership.
Do you meet with the Senior Leadership Team, if so how often? Tell me about how you work with the Senior Leadership Team? **(NOT FOR THE SENCO PRINCIPAL)**
23. Would you be/ are you comfortable having a leadership role? **(NOT FOR THE SENCO PRINCIPAL)**

SENCO Professional Learning

24. Have you engaged in any specific professional learning to support you in your SENCO role?
25. Is in-service education in the area of special education readily available and easy to access? Do you discuss new practices or new knowledge in SEN with the SEN team or class teachers?
26. In your opinion, to what extent is in-service education effective in supporting you in your role as SENCO?
27. Are you supported to engage in in-service education in this area?
28. The survey indicated that 44% of SENCOs said they had no training regarding the implementation of the new Model. Did you receive training and was it effective in the implementation or on deciding how to allocate resources?
29. The survey found that 39% of SENCOs are part of a Community of Practice. Are you a member of a Community of Practice or have you attended any gatherings of either SENCOs or SET teachers? If so have you found it beneficial and why?
30. Have you visited other schools or met to discuss your role with other teachers outside of your school?

31. The survey showed that 75% of SENCOs think there is a need for a SENCO specific third level postgraduate programme. Do you think there is a need for this and why?
32. The survey showed that the most sought after components for a SENCO specific postgraduate programme were teaching strategies for SEN, developing alternative curriculum including evidenced based strategies and identifying pupils level of need, do you agree with this or should other aspects be included and why?
33. What are the professional learning needs of SENCOs to allow them to effectively enact their role?

Staff Professional Learning

34. Is in-service education in the area of special education readily available and easy to access for all staff?
35. How are staff supported to pursue in-service education in this area?

Conclusion

36. If you could make a recommendation to the Minister for Education about the SENCO role, what would you say?
37. Do you think there should be a fulltime SENCO position dedicated to duties outside of teaching? Should time be allocated to non-teaching SENCO roles? Should each school be mandated to have a full post of responsibility for SEN provision in the school?
38. Is there anything else you want to tell me about that I haven't already asked, but that you feel is important?

Principal Interview Schedule

General

1. How long have you been Principal in this school?

2. Tell me a little about your teaching background- what roles have you experienced that help you as a Principal?
3. Have you had any experience in SEN?

School Context and SEN Provision

4. To get a picture of the school context can I ask how many pupils are receiving SEN supports in your school? How many SETs are in your school? How many SNA are in the school? Do you have a special class in the school? Do you have a HSL?
5. Tell me about the ethos of the school- Is there an inclusive ethos? How is this evident?
6. In your opinion, what are the key benefits of including pupils with SEN in your school?
7. Do you think there are any challenges to including pupils with SEN in your school?
8. In general, do you think staff are supportive to including children with SEN?
9. Do you use the Continuum of Support in your school? What does that look like? Can you give some examples of the kind of thing that is happening at each level on the continuum (classroom support, school support, school support plus)?
Possible prompts here are: What type of provision/ supports are available/ screening assessment, how is progress monitored or measured? Does your school use SSPs?
10. In the last few years, the new model of resource allocation has brought about many changes. What has been the impact on practice in your school in light of these policy changes?
11. Did the new model have implications on the role of the SENCO and your own role?
12. In light of the changes that have occurred since the new model was implemented are there systems in place to support staff in dealing with changes. Prompts might include:
 - (a) Opportunities for staff to meet and discuss implications at structured meetings

- (b) Opportunities to share good practice and knowledge both within and between schools?
 - (c) Opportunities to listen, share and discuss and resolve problems
13. What is the role of the board of management in supporting SEN provision in your school? SEN Policy? Who is responsible for updating and implementing the SEN policy?

Whole-school Approach

14. Are there school-wide systems in place to communicate information about students with special educational needs? Prompts could include
- (a) Scheduled SEN team meetings
 - (b) Including SEN items on staff meeting agenda
 - (c) Cascading of Professional learning / specific training
 - (d) Sharing of information through electronic portals

SENCO Role and Responsibilities from Principal's perspective

15. Tell me about the role of the SENCO. What does/ he or she do? Prompt could include:
- (a) Do they hold a post of responsibility/part of the management team?
 - (b) Do they have a full teaching timetable or is there time allocated for other SENCO duties outside of teaching?
 - (c) Do they have administrative responsibilities- screening/ assessments/ timetabling/ SSPs?
 - (d) Does the SENCO have management responsibilities- SNAs, other SET Teachers
 - (e) What are the main priorities / responsibilities?
 - (f) Does the SENCO provide professional learning to others in the support team or to class teachers
16. Are there other duties that you think the SENCO should be doing? Does the SENCO have responsibilities that you feel they shouldn't have?
17. Do the duties of the SENCO support you in your role as principal? If so, how?

18. In Phase 1 (the survey), the area of ‘support from the principal’, came through as a factor that effectively facilitates the SENCO role. What would be your view on this? From your own perspective what does being a supportive principal look like (any examples)?
19. Do you think your SENCO has enough formal support in their role? Is there support in the form of policy guidance? Are you aware of any policy guidance for this role?
20. The survey identified that working collaboratively with others came through as a factor that facilitates SENCOs to fulfil their role- What is your view on this? What has been your experience of this? In your experience, how does collaboration between Senior Leadership Team, SENCOs and the SEN team affect outcomes for students? In your opinion are there any other things that effectively facilitate the SENCO role?
21. The survey identified that the main barriers to effective execution of the SENCO role were Time, having multiple roles and inadequate/ lack of support from external professional services for staff and pupils. Has your school encountered any of these barriers or others? Can you tell me how they have impacted the SENCO role? How has your school overcome these challenges or dealt with them?
22. The survey indicated that the rotation of staff in the SET team was a barrier to effective SENCO role enactment, due to the amount of time to mentor and guide new team members. Do you have a view on this? What works for your school?

Leadership in SEN

23. Who takes the lead on SEN in your school?
24. Can you tell me what leadership in SEN means to you? What does it look like?
25. In your opinion to what extent do SENCOs lead and coordinate the strategic planning of SEN provision in your school?
26. The survey indicated that the SENCO has insufficient time to work with Senior Leadership.
Does your SENCO meet with the Senior Leadership Team, if so how often?
Tell me about how the SENCO works with the Senior Leadership Team?

SENCO, Principal and Staff Professional Learning

27. Have you engaged in any specific professional learning for Principals (either formally accredited or informally) that supports you in your knowledge and understanding of inclusive approaches to SEN?
28. Have you visited other schools or met with other Principals to discuss the SENCO role outside of your school? Are you involved or aware of any community of practices?
29. The survey showed that 75% of SENCOs think there is a need for a SENCO specific third level postgraduate programme. Do you think there is a need for this and why?
30. In your opinion, what are the professional learning needs of SENCOs to allow them to effectively enact their role?
31. How do you support your staff, including your SENCO, to pursue in-service education in this area?
32. Are there opportunities for staff, including members of the SEN team to share their expertise with other colleagues? If so, how is this facilitated?
33. Is professional learning in the area of SEN a priority in your school?

Conclusion

34. If you could make a recommendation to the Minister for Education about the SENCO role, what would you say?
35. Do you think there should be a fulltime SENCO position dedicated to duties outside of teaching? Should time be allocated to non-teaching SENCO roles? Should each school be mandated to have a full post of responsibility for SEN provision in the school?
36. Is there anything else you want to tell me about that I haven't already asked, but that you feel is important?

APPENDIX 12: Cover Email – Phase 2 (Pilot)



Mary Immaculate College

A Chara,

I hope this email finds you well.

I am a PhD student in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. I am currently completing research as part of my doctoral thesis. The research is being supervised by Dr Johanna Fitzgerald (Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education).

My research is exploring SENCOs' and Principals' perspectives on the role of the SENCO, identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for professional learning for SENCOs. The study will explore the tasks and responsibilities of the SENCO, barriers and facilitators that influence SENCOs in fulfilling their role and the extent that SENCOs lead and coordinate strategic planning of school-wide inclusive practices. It is hoped that this research will contribute to policy and practice in this area.

As part of my study, I am designing a semi-structured interview schedule (45-60 minutes) for SENCOs and principals which asks about their experiences and perceptions of the SENCO role. Before I complete the interviews, I would like to pilot it by asking a small number of SENCOs and principals to engage in the interview and provide feedback to me about the clarity of the questions, completion time, questions which should be included/omitted etc. I have attached an information sheet giving further details about my research; please contact me if you have any questions.

I would really appreciate if the SENCO (person responsible for SEN provision) or the Principal in your school would consider participating in this pilot.

Kind regards,

Sarah Gallagher.

Researcher Contact Details:

Sarah Gallagher

Sarah.gallagher@mic.ul.ie

Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Johanna Fitzgerald

Johanna.Fitzgerald@mic.ul.ie
+353 61 204517

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

APPENDIX 13: Information Sheet – Phase 2 (Pilot)



Mary Immaculate College

Study Title: Leadership for Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools: An Exploration of the Role of the Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO).

Who is conducting the study? This research is being conducted by Sarah Gallagher, a PhD student at Mary Immaculate College (Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education). The research is being supervised by Dr Johanna Fitzgerald.

What is the study about? The study seeks to explore SENCOs' and Principal's perspectives on the role of the SENCO, identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for professional learning for SENCOs. The study will explore the tasks and responsibilities of the SENCO, barriers and facilitators that influence SENCOs in fulfilling their role and the extent that SENCOs lead and coordinate strategic planning of school-wide inclusive practices. A questionnaire was distributed to participants in Phase 1 of the main study. **This Pilot for Phase 2 is being carried out in order to refine a semi-structured interview schedule for Phase 2.** Phase 2 will involve interviews to investigate themes identified in Phase 1.

Why is it important? Irish policy does not include a clear definition of the SENCO role, and research into the role is scarce within Ireland. The roles and responsibilities of the SENCO vary internationally. In light of recent changes to the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model, it is important to explore the impact of these changes in school policy and practice and in particular the impact on SENCOs or teachers involved in coordination of provision in schools. It is hoped that this research will contribute to policy and practice by giving an insight into SENCOs' and Principals' perceptions of the role, and provide some future directions to support schools in responding to the needs to children with diverse needs.

Who can participate? Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (those responsible for SEN provision in schools) and Principals in primary schools will participate in Phase 2.

What will I have to do? You will be asked to verbally provide informed consent at the beginning of the interview. You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview about your perceptions of the SENCO role, which will be tailored to your role. The interview will be conducted via Microsoft Teams. You will be asked for permission for the interview to be recorded via Microsoft Teams. After the interview, you will be asked to give feedback to the researcher about the interview e.g. clarity of questions, ease of completion, areas for improvement, questions which should be included or omitted.

How long will it take? Participating in the interview should take no more than 45-60 minutes. The feedback session will take approximately 15-20 minutes.

Can I withdraw from the study? Your participation is voluntary and you are under no obligation to participate. You can withdraw at any point before or during your participation in the study without providing any reason and without any consequences. If you wish to withdraw your data afterwards you can do so by contacting the researcher.

How will my information be used? Your feedback will be used to improve the interview schedule before it is used in the main study. Any feedback which you provide will be anonymised. The researcher will have custody of data. The supervisor may need occasional access to the data. The study will adhere to relevant requirements in terms of data protection, GDPR, anonymity and confidentiality. All data will be anonymised as soon as possible, and anonymised data may be retained indefinitely as required by the researcher.

Researcher Contact Details:

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Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Johanna Fitzgerald
Johanna.Fitzgerald@mic.ul.ie
+353 61 204517

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

APPENDIX 14: Informed Consent Form – Phase 2 (Pilot)



Mary Immaculate College

Note: The following statements will be read aloud by the primary investigator before beginning the semi-structured interview. The participant will respond verbally to each statement.

Study Title: Leadership for Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools: An Exploration of the Role of the Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO).

1. I have read and understand the participant information sheet. *(Allow time for participant response)*
2. I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for. *(Allow time for participant response)*
3. I understand that I am agreeing to participate in the Pilot for Phase 2 of this project. *(Allow time for participant response)*
4. I am fully aware of all of the procedures involving myself, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study. *(Allow time for participant response)*
5. I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving any reason. *(Allow time for participant response)*
6. I am aware that my results will be kept confidential. *(Allow time for participant response)*

APPENDIX 15: Expression of Interest Survey – Phase 2

1. Are you willing to participate in semi-structured interviews that will take place during Phase 2 of this research? Note these interviews will explore your views around the themes that are derived from the results of Phase 1.

- a. Yes
- b. No

If yes, please answer the following questions:

2. What is your name and email address?

3. What is your school type? (Select all that apply)

- a. Denominational National School
- b. Community National School
- c. Educate Together
- d. Gaelscoil
- e. Private
- f. Other (Please specify) _____

4. Does your school have DEIS status?

- a. Yes
- b. No

5. How would you describe your school's catchment area?

- a. Urban (city/suburbs)
- b. Urban (town)
- c. Urban and rural mixed (e.g. town and surrounding countryside)
- d. Rural

6. Is your school single-sex or coeducational?

- a. Boys only
- b. Girls only
- c. Mixed boys and girls

5. Approximately how many pupils attend your school?

- a. 0-100
- b. 100-200
- c. 200-300
- d. 300-400
- e. Over 400

APPENDIX 16: Cover Email – Phase 2



Mary Immaculate College

A Chara,

I hope this email finds you well.

I am a PhD student in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. I am currently completing research as part of my doctoral thesis. The research is being supervised by Dr Johanna Fitzgerald (Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education).

My research is exploring SENCOs' and Principals' perspectives on the role of the SENCO, identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for professional learning for SENCOs. The study will explore the tasks and responsibilities of the SENCO, barriers and facilitators that influence SENCOs in fulfilling their role and the extent that SENCOs lead and coordinate strategic planning of school-wide inclusive practices. It is hoped that this research will contribute to policy and practice in this area.

As part of my study, I would like to speak with SENCOs and Principals (45-60 minutes) about their experiences and perceptions of the SENCO role. Interviews will take place via Microsoft Teams. I have attached an information sheet giving further details about my research; please contact me if you have any questions.

I would really appreciate if the SENCO (person responsible for coordinating SEN provision) or Principal in your school would consider speaking with me.

Kind regards,

Sarah Gallagher.

Researcher Contact Details:

Sarah Gallagher

Sarah.gallagher@mic.ul.ie

Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Johanna Fitzgerald

Johanna.Fitzgerald@mic.ul.ie
+353 61 204517

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

APPENDIX 17: Information Sheet – Phase 2



Mary Immaculate College

Study Title: Leadership for Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools: An Exploration of the Role of the Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO).

Who is conducting the study? This research is being conducted by Sarah Gallagher, a PhD student at Mary Immaculate College (Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education). The research is being supervised by Dr Johanna Fitzgerald.

What is the study about? The study seeks to explore SENCOs' and Principal's perspectives on the role of the SENCO, identify the current practices of SENCOs and the implications for professional learning for SENCOs. The study will explore the tasks and responsibilities of the SENCO, barriers and facilitators that influence SENCOs in fulfilling their role and the extent that SENCOs lead and coordinate strategic planning of school-wide inclusive practices. Phase 1 of the research identified common themes using a questionnaire which was distributed to the three groups. **This second phase involves interviews to investigate the themes identified in Phase 1.**

Why is it important? Irish policy does not include a clear definition of the SENCO role, and research into the role is scarce within Ireland. The roles and responsibilities of the SENCO vary internationally. In light of recent changes to the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model, it is important to explore the impact of these changes in school policy and practice and in particular the impact on SENCOs or teachers involved in coordination of provision in schools. It is hoped that this research will contribute to policy and practice by giving an insight into SENCOs' and Principals' perceptions of the role, and provide some future directions to support schools in responding to the needs to children with diverse needs.

Who can participate? Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (those responsible for SEN provision in schools) and Principals in primary schools will participate.

What will I have to do? You will be asked to verbally provide informed consent at the beginning of the interview. You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview about your perceptions of the SENCO role, which will be tailored to your role. The interview will be conducted via Microsoft Teams. You will be asked for permission for the interview to be recorded via Microsoft Teams. The interview will be exploratory and non-judgemental; any information which you share in the interview will not be shared with other participants. Further information about confidentiality is provided below.

How long will it take? Participating in the interview should take no more than 45-60 minutes.

Can I withdraw from the study? Your participation is voluntary and you are under no obligation to participate. You can withdraw at any point before or during your participation in the study without providing any reason and without any consequences. If you wish to withdraw your data afterwards you can do so by contacting the researcher.

How will my information be used? Your interview will be recorded via Microsoft Teams and transcribed. The transcription will be anonymised and pseudonyms will be used when writing the research report. No identifying information (name, workplace etc.) will be included in the transcription or final research report. The researcher will have custody of data. The supervisor may need occasional access to the data. The study will adhere to all relevant requirements in terms of data protection, GDPR, anonymity and confidentiality. All data will be anonymised as soon as possible, and anonymised data may be retained indefinitely as required by the researcher.

Researcher Contact Details:

Sarah Gallagher
Sarah.gallagher@mic.ul.ie

Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Johanna Fitzgerald
Johanna.Fitzgerald@mic.ul.ie
+353 61 204517

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

APPENDIX 18: Informed Consent Form – Phase 2



Mary Immaculate College

Note: The following statements will be read aloud by the primary investigator before beginning the semi-structured interview. The participant will respond verbally to each statement.

Study Title: Leadership for Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools: An Exploration of the Role of the Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO).

1. I have read and understand the participant information sheet. *(Allow time for participant response)*
2. I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for. *(Allow time for participant response)*
3. I understand that I am agreeing to participate in the Pilot for Phase 2 of this project. *(Allow time for participant response)*
4. I am fully aware of all of the procedures involving myself, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study. *(Allow time for participant response)*
5. I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving any reason. *(Allow time for participant response)*
6. I am aware that my results will be kept confidential. *(Allow time for participant response)*

APPENDIX 19: Phase 1 Enablers Qualitative Analysis Codebook (RTA Phase 2 to 5)

Codebook\\ Phase 2 - Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding

Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (18 initial codes developed at phase 2)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Units of Meaning Coded
Collaboration Class Teacher	References made by participants related to collaboration with class teachers as an enabler	29
Collaboration SEN Team	References made by participants related to collaboration with SEN team as an enabler	37
Collaboration Management/ Principals	References made by participants related to collaboration with Principals and management as an enabler	26
Communities of Practice	References made by participants related to CoP teachers as an enabler	61
Continuous Professional Development	References made by participants related to CPD as an enabler	35
NCSE	References made by participants related to the NCSE as an enabler	16
NEPS	References made by participants related to NEPS as an enabler	18
Parental/ Life Experience	References made by participants related to parental/ life experience as an enabler	3
Planning Time/ Release Days	References made by participants related to release days as an enabler	22
School Policy	References made by participants related to the school policy as an enabler	2
SEN Teaching Experience	References made by participants related to SEN experience as an enabler	14
Support from Colleagues	References made by participants related to support from colleagues as an enabler	76
Support from External Agencies	References made by participants related to support from external agencies as an enabler	6
Support from Parents	References made by participants related to support from parents as an enabler	11
Support from Principals	References made by participants related to support from Principals as an enabler	67
Teaching Experience	References made by participants related to teaching experience as an enabler	32
Third Level Qualifications	References made by participants related to support from colleagues as an enabler	38
Working with Experienced Colleagues	References made by participants related to working with experienced colleagues as an enabler	4

Codebook\\ Phase 3 Generating Initial Themes from Coded and Collated Data (Developing categories)

Phase 3 Generating initial themes/ from coded data (12 initial themes developed from 18 initial codes)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Units of Meaning Coded
Class Teacher Collaboration	References made by participants related to collaboration with class teachers as an enabler	29
Communities of Practice	References made by participants related to CoP teachers as an enabler	61
On-going CPD	References made by participants related to CPD as an enabler	35
Principal/ Management Collaboration	References made by participants related to collaboration with Principals and management as an enabler	26
SEN Teaching Experience	References made by participants related to SEN experience as an enabler	14
SEN Team Collaboration	References made by participants related to collaboration with SEN team as an enabler	37
Support from Colleagues	References made by participants related to support from colleagues as an enabler	76
Support from Principals/ Management	References made by participants related to support from Principals as an enabler	67
Supportive Resourcing	References made by participants related to support from the Department through release days and support from NEPS and NCSE as an enabler	56
Teaching Experience	References made by participants related to teaching experience as an enabler	32
Third Level Qualifications	References made by participants related to support from colleagues as an enabler	38
Working with Experienced Colleagues	References made by participants related to working with experienced colleagues as an enabler	4

Codebook\\ Phase 4 Developing and Reviewing Themes

Phase 4 Developing and reviewing themes (4 initial themes consolidated into 12 reviewed themes)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Units of Meaning Coded
Collaboration	References made by participants related to collaboration with class teachers, SEN Team and Management as an enabler	92
Support	References made by participants related to support from colleagues, Principals and management and resourcing as an enabler	199
Teacher Professional Learning	References made by participants related to teacher professional learning (CPD, qualifications and CoPs) as an enabler	134
Experience	References made by participants related to experience (SEN, teaching and working with experienced colleagues) as an enabler	53

Codebook\\Phase 5 Refining, Defining and Naming Themes (Developing a Thematic Framework)

Phase 5 Refining, defining, and naming themes (4 reviewed themes consolidated into 1 named and defined themes with 4 sub-themes)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Units of Meaning Coded
T1 - Knowledgeable, experienced and connected SENCOs are enabled by a culture of collaboration in a supportive environment	This theme relates to the enablers of the SENCO role and identifies these key facilitators to SENCO role enactment	478
T1.1 - Collaboration	References made by participants related to collaboration with class teachers, SEN Team and Management as an enabler	92
T1.2 - Support	References made by participants related to support from colleagues, Principals and management and resourcing as an enabler	199
T1.3 - Teacher Professional Learning	References made by participants related to teacher professional learning (CPD, qualifications and CoPs) as an enabler	134
T1.4 - Experience	References made by participants related to experience (SEN, teaching and working with experienced colleagues) as an enabler	53

APPENDIX 20: Phase 1 Barriers Qualitative Analysis Codebook (RTA Phase 2 to 5)

Codebook\\Phase 2 - Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding

Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (22 initial codes developed at phase 2)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Units of Meaning Coded
No Role Recognition	References made by participants related to lack of role clarity and recognition as a barrier	23
Teaching Caseload & SENCO Role	References made by participants related to having teaching and SENCO responsibilities together as a barrier	45
Multiple Posts & Responsibilities	References made by participants related to having multiple posts as a barrier	37
Lack of Time for SENCO Duties	References made by participants related to lack of time to do the SENCO role as a barrier	183
Lack of Planning and Collaboration Time	References made by participants related to lack of planning and collaboration as a barrier	23
Extensive Workload	References made by participants related to the extensive workload and lack of time associated with this as a barrier	31
Unsupportive Teachers	References made by participants related to unsupportive teachers as a barrier	18
Unsupportive Parents	References made by participants related to unsupportive parents as a barrier	4
Unsupportive Principal	References made by participants related to unsupportive Principal as a barrier	12
Lack of Understanding	References made by participants related to lack of understanding as a barrier	5
Waiting Lists for External Agencies	References made by participants related to waiting lists for external agencies as a barrier	20
Lack of Training	References made by participants related to lack of training for the SENCO role as a barrier	28
Lack of Teachers/ SETs/ SNAs	References made by participants related to lack of teachers, staff, SNAs, SETS as a barrier	32
Inadequate External Agency Support	References made by participants related to inadequate external agency support as a barrier	56
Lack of Department Support/ Resources	References made by participants related to lack of support and resources from the DE as a barrier	42
Administration and Paperwork	References made by participants related to the extensive administration and paperwork as a barrier	38
Using SETs as Subs	References made by participants related to using SETs as substitute teachers as a barrier	8

Resistance to Change	References made by participants related to a resistance to change from teachers as a barrier	2
SET Team Rotation	References made by participants related to the rotation of SET Team as a barrier	7
Inexperienced SETs	References made by participants related to using inexperienced SETs as a barrier	16
Growing Needs	References made by participants related to the growing needs of pupils as a barrier	13
Removal of DP Release Days	References made by participants related to removing release days as a barrier	2

Codebook\\Phase 3 Generating Initial Themes from Coded and Collated Data (Developing categories)

Phase 3 Generating initial themes/ from coded data (10 initial themes developed from 22 initial codes)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Units of Meaning Coded
Inadequate Support from External Professional Services	References made by participants related to inadequate external agency support as a barrier	56
Inappropriate Waiting Lists	References made by participants related to inappropriate waiting lists for external agencies as a barrier	20
Lack of Planning and Collaboration Time	References made by participants related to lack of planning and collaboration as a barrier	23
Lack of Resources and Staffing	References made by participants related to lack of teachers, staff, SNAs, SETS and lack of Department support and resources as a barrier	74
Lack of Role Clarity and Recognition	References made by participants related to lack of role clarity and recognition as a barrier	23
Lack of Time for SENCO Duties	References made by participants related to lack of time to do the SENCO role as a barrier	183
Lack of Training	References made by participants related to lack of training for the SENCO role as a barrier	28
Multiple Posts & Responsibilities	References made by participants related to having multiple posts as a barrier	37
SENCO Extensive Workload	References made by participants related to the extensive workload and the extensive paperwork and administration as a barrier	69
Teaching Caseload along with the SENCO Role	References made by participants related to having teaching and SENCO responsibilities together as a barrier	45

Codebook\\ Phase 4 Developing and Reviewing Themes

Phase 4 Developing and reviewing themes (4 initial themes consolidated into 10 reviewed themes)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Units of Meaning Coded
Lack of Time	References made by participants related to a lack of time as a barrier	206
Multiple Roles and Responsibilities	References made by participants related to having multiple roles, responsibilities, and extensive workload as a barrier	120
Inadequate External Supports	References made by participants related to inadequate support from external agencies as a barrier	76
Ambiguous and Limited Policy Guidance	References made by participants related to lack of policy, training, resourcing and staffing from the DE as a barrier	74

Codebook\\Phase 5 Refining, Defining and Naming Themes (Developing a Thematic Framework)

Phase 5 Refining, defining, and naming themes (4 reviewed themes consolidated into 1 named and defined themes with 4 sub-themes)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Units of Meaning Coded
T1 – The SENCO role is extensive and nebulous and operates with insufficient time, inadequate external professional support and within a policy vacuum	This theme relates to the barriers of the SENCO role and identifies these key barriers to SENCO role enactment	478
T1.1 - Lack of Time	References made by participants related to a lack of time as a barrier	206
T1.2 - Multiple Roles and Responsibilities	References made by participants related to having multiple roles, responsibilities, and extensive workload as a barrier	120
T1.3 - Inadequate External Supports	References made by participants related to inadequate support from external agencies as a barrier	76
T1.4 - Ambiguous and Limited Policy Guidance	References made by participants related to lack of policy, training, resourcing and staffing from the DE as a barrier	74

APPENDIX 21: Handwritten familiarisation notes on transcription

Barriers

Facilitator

Time

Facilitator:
Collaboration
teams
↓
Supportive
colleagues

So, and like with SET in particular, um, there's a huge amount of collaboration and like the, uh, the SET subteams that we're talking about, and we have SETs working together to support a particular class group. And, um, you could, you couldn't do the job unless you had support and collaboration behind you.

Researcher: So outside of those two things, then, professional learning and, and, uh, working collaboratively with colleagues, you know, are there any other supports that would [00:17:30] support you to, um, you know, fulfil the SENCO role?

Participant: Time if I had some.

Researcher: Yeah.

Participant: Yeah. Okay. That'd be the biggest thing. I mean, like, anything that I've been asked to do, I can manage, I can do, it just takes time. Okay. And it means, you know, it has, it has to be done in the evening.

Researcher: Yeah. So the survey, I did identify that the, uh, the main barrier, um, time and also having multiple roles was another barrier. And also, [00:18:00] um, inadequate external, uh, support and the lack of external support from external agencies. So have, you've obviously encountered the time, um, you know, have you encountered any of these other barriers, like, um, multiple roles? So that's like, obviously your teaching and your SENCO role going together or having, um, you know, post of responsibility with other things as well as SENCO role. So would multiple, um, you know, roles, would that, would you see that [00:18:30] as a barrier to, to facilitating your, your role effectively?

Participant: Um, it doesn't help. Uh, like part of my, also part of my A post, like all the post holders in the school, uh, have a curricular subject as well. And maths is my one. And there's a new maths curriculum coming down the road. And because we're a new DEIS school, we have a new DEIS action plan that we have to get up and running and numeracy is one of the themes. And so as if I didn't have enough on my plate, that's [00:19:00] going to be my baby as well. Now the only thing is, you know, there will be other teachers working with me and already, you know, three others came to me to say, listen, I'll give you a hand now with numeracy, great. Happy days. So no, that, you know, but, but that is going to take additional time and that's completely separate to the senco role. I suppose the fact that I do facilitate that meeting in the, in the, um, the Waterford teacher centre, even though it's only like the first Monday of every month, it's still, that's a whole other kind of two hours [00:19:30] that I'm giving to, to that role. Um, other than that, sorry, there was another thing if you mentioned there, and it's gone outta my head. Yeah.

Researcher: It's the, um, the, the inadequate external support. Oh.

Participant: Uh, look, I mean that's, that goes without saying. So this year we have, we actually don't have a designated NEPs psychologist. So our NEP psychologist retired, in fact, three NEPs psychologists retired outta the Waterford area. And [00:20:00] so all we had access to was two scapa assessments. And they're not ideal for complex cases. Now, you know, we, we, we have several children with complex needs and we wanted to put

Barriers
Lack of External Support

Multiple Roles
POE
Curricular Subjects as well as SENCO
(Maths)

Deis Action Plan
Numeracy is one of the themes

Doing role in Personal time

poor

Lack of External support
NO designated NEPs psych

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APPENDIX 22¹: Phase 2 Interview Codebook - Phase 1 – Familiarisation and Writing Familiarisation Notes

The screenshot shows a transcription window titled 'S1 SENCO Interview'. The transcript includes the following text:

Researcher: [00:29:00] And are you responsible for coordinating the timetable of the, the set staff then?

Participant: So we, we would have, um, a general discussion at the start of the year and I, I would give the SETs, but you know, because we have an SET per class level, I will have done up, um, an overview of, uh, pupils that need SET provision in that class mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So they will see who is on school support, who is on school [00:29:30] support plus, um, from senior infant and first class point of view I will give them a sheet with names of the kids that had SET support the previous year, um, even if it was just for a couple of weeks, just so they have some idea of the kids that needed a little bit of extra help. Um, and then we have a discussion about, okay, what kind of in-class support are we going to offer first and then the SETs go off with within their small subgroup and they really kind of organise their own timetables. So I don't have to do, [00:30:00] um, like an individual SET timetable for every single SET mm-hmm. <affirmative>, that would be a nightmare. Yeah. I know secondary school SENCOs do that, I think, but, uh, no, that's not, it's not part of, not part of what I do. And then I would also, you know, I make sure that we have, um, SEN meetings regularly and I do up minutes and I send out agendas and, uh, I keep all that kinda stuff. Um, I, I, to be honest, I feel like I don't have a minute to myself. I mean, [00:30:30] and at any given time somebody can just pop their head in the door to say, listen, can I just ask you? Or I have a question, or would you mind if I had to look at, or what would I do about Yeah. And that's just constant all the time.

Researcher: Okay. Okay. Um, okay. What I'm gonna do now is I'm gonna shut this off and come back in again because we're just finishing up on that question there. So, um, yeah. So I'll, I'll see you in a minute. Okay.

Participant: So I'll just use the same link to come back in again.

Researcher: Yeah. Yeah.

PART 2

Participant: Just kind of,

The bottom panel shows an 'Annotations' table:

Item	Content
3	Participant said this when talking about their SENCO roles and responsibilities.

A red callout box with the text: **Phase 1 – Familiarisation and Writing Familiarisation Notes involved reading and re-reading transcripts and annotating to integrate contextual factors such as coding assumptions, field notes and observations and researcher's thoughts and ideas during the encoding process** points to the highlighted text in the transcript and the corresponding annotation in the table.

¹ Codebook – Phase 1 – Familiarisation and Writing Familiarisation Notes involved reading and re-reading transcripts and annotating to integrate contextual factors such as coding assumptions, field notes and observations and researcher's thoughts and ideas during the encoding process

APPENDIX 23²- Codebook\\Phase 2 - Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (Open Coding)

Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (156 initial codes developed at phase 2)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
Advising staff	References made by participants related to advising staff.	3	3
Allocation and prioritisation of SEN	References made by participants related to the allocation and prioritisation of time and resources for children with SEN.	6	8
Assessment, identification, target setting	References made by participants related to assessment (pre and post), identification and the setting of targets.	9	23
Benefits for child with additional needs	References made by participant that children with additional needs can be cared for by other children without those needs.	3	3
Caseloads impacting children's progress	References made by participants related to challenges regarding how caseloads impact learning support childrens' progress. Impact of supports being spread thinly.	3	3
Challenges for staff and Management- Staff Burnout	Reference made by participant that staff can get burned out,	1	1
Changes in practice due to new model- More organised	References made by participants relating to being more organised since the new model.	3	4
Changes in practice due to SETAM. Increased school autonomy	References made by participants related to changes in schools autonomy due to the new model (SETAM).	8	15
Changes in practices due to new model (SETAM). No diagnoses needed.	References made by participants related to how practices changed due to the new model, SETAM.	6	9
Changes in T&L (methodologies, evidenced based practices, intervention)	References made by participants re changes since 2017 in T&L and making the curriculum more accessible.	2	3
Communication is very important in leading	References made by participant that communication with staff is very important part to gaining buy-in- influencing them.	3	9

² Codebook -Phase 2 – Generating Initial Coding involved deconstructing the data from its original chronology into an initial set of non-hierarchical codes

Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (156 initial codes developed at phase 2)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
Community of Practice for Principals (COP)	References made by participants regarding Muisneach (principals COP)	5	9
Consumed in the day to day and not strategically planning for SEN provisions	References made by participant that they do not get a chance to think about SEN provision in the long-term.	1	2
Continuum of Support (COS)	References related to participant regarding the Continuum of Support.	8	17
Co-ordinating SEN Meetings	References made by participants regarding organising and implementing SEN meetings.	7	10
Co-ordinating the SEN team	References made by participants related to co-ordinating the SEN team.	9	16
CPD-Keeping up to date with research and best practice (evidenced based practices)	References made by participants relating to a challenge to keep up with best practice.	2	4
Creating own PL supports through COP	References made by participants regarding creating their own COP.	2	3
Dealing with Parents knowledge on the new model	References made by participants relating to parents and the new model.	3	3
Developing school wide procedures for behaviour management.	References made by participants regarding developing structures and procedures on behaviour management.	2	4
Devising and revising Special Ed Policy	References made by participants related to Special Ed policy.	6	9
Difficulty for SEN Team in finding, accessing professional learning at times	References made by participants relating to difficulty in finding CPD at times	4	6
Difficulty in knowing the appropriateness of level and type of SEN Courses	References made by participants relating to the kind of courses that are appropriate for the varying levels of experience in SEN.	1	1
Distributed leadership	References made by participant regarding distributed leadership.	5	18
Enablers in acquiring and doing the principals role (highlights lack of SEN exp)	Reference made by participant relating to what supported them in acquiring and doing the principal role.	2	7
Engaging with external agencies	References made by participants related to engaging with external agencies.	5	8

Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (156 initial codes developed at phase 2)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
Ensuring SET teachers are only used for SET teaching	References made by participant that they stand up to SET teachers not filling in for mainstream.	1	1
Enthusiasm for role and working closely with children	References made by participants regarding working closely with children in SEN.	1	1
Establishing consistency in SEN Team	References made by participants related to need to establish consistency within SEN Team and the SEN approach.	3	6
Exceptional review too cumbersome- More needs than resources and supports (SETs SNAs)	References made by participant relating to more needs than supports and exceptional review is cumbersome.	1	1
Experience	References made by participants relating to experience supporting them in executing the role.	3	5
External In-service PL for SETs from NCSE and others on new practices	Reference by participant relating to in-service PL in the school for SETs	1	2
Fear of Impacts of proposed changes by DE and policy (New Brunswick Model)	Reference made by participant regarding new changes coming down the line with the Brunswick Model	1	2
Format of third level SENCO specific course	Reference made by participant that third level course should be practical visiting schools and doing the job as training.	3	4
Format of professional Learning	References made by participants re format of PL.	6	12
Frequent turnover of SEN staff	References made by participants regarding changes to the SEN team and retraining and upheaval.	3	3
Given Post of responsibility	References made by participants related to reasons and motivations as to why the SENCO attained and holds the SENCO post.	5	7
Growing Role	References made by participants related to the growing and evolving nature of the SENCO role.	6	8
Identifying pupils	References made by participants related to Identifying pupils with SEN.	9	16

Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (156 initial codes developed at phase 2)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
Impact of change of school status (DEIS)	References made by participants related to the impact on the school due to the change of DEIS status.	1	2
Impact of COVID on SET	References made by participants related to the effect of COVID on SET provision in schools.	2	2
Impact on SEN rotation policy if they are gaining qualifications and specialisms	References made by participants regarding SEN staff remaining in SEN if they are gaining qualifications	1	1
In the future a shared SENCO between Schools	References made by participants relating to thoughts on a shared SENCO between different schools.	2	2
Inadequate External Supports	References made by participants related to inadequate external supports being a barrier to executing the role.	9	25
Inclusive practices evidence	References made by participants showing evidence of inclusive practices.	8	21
Inclusiveness- Participants thoughts on if there school is inclusive	References made by participants regarding their thoughts on if their school is inclusive.	7	11
Increased paperwork	References made by participant re paperwork and new policy.	5	7
Increases in Team Teaching	References made by participants regarding increased Team teaching due to new Model.	3	3
Influx of EAL pupils	References made by participants relating to increase in EAL pupils.	2	2
In-service Professional learning in SEN	References made by participants being supported to do in-service professional learning in the area of SEN.	6	13
Lack of clarity on amount of SEN support provision	References made by participants related to a lack of clarity regarding the amount of children who need SEN support in schools.	2	3
Lack of External Supports (Assessment & Therapy)	References made by participants related to related to lack of external agency support.	4	6
Lack of Multi-disciplinary Teams and Meeting in setting out children's SSPs	References made by participants relating to lack of multidisciplinary teams.	4	9

Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (156 initial codes developed at phase 2)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
Lack of policy guidance or formal guidance on the SENCO role	References made by participant re no formal / policy guidance for the role of SENCO	1	2
Lack of Policy on public services working together	References made by participant that public service do not support each other to create links for pupils to access services they need.	2	2
Lack of resources	References made by participants relating to a lack of resources.	4	8
Lack of resources such SNAs and Behaviour supports.	References made by participant relating to a lack of supports regarding behaviour SNAs	3	6
Lack of Time	References made by participants regarding not having enough time to execute the role.	7	17
Lack of time for SET Team SET meetings to plan, identify and work with the COS for SEN	References made by participants relating to lack of collaboration time on SET meetings	1	6
Leadership course completed	References made by participant regarding leadership course completed.	2	2
Leading and Co-ordinating the strategic planning of SEN	References made by participants related to leading and co-ordinating the long term planning in SEN along management.	8	18
Leading and implementing initiatives	References made by participants regarding leading and implementing initiatives.	5	10
Leading SEN Provision	References made by participants regarding the leading of the SEN supports and provision in the school.	9	31
Leading whole-school initiatives	References made by participant regarding leading whole-school initiatives.	6	13
Level 3 needs exhausting SEN supports.	References made by participants related to level 3 needs exhausting SEN supports and difficulty catering for all levels of need.	3	3
Liaising with external agencies	References made by participant that they liaise with external agencies.	6	11
Liaising with Parents	References made by participants regarding liaising with parents.	4	7
Managing exceptional review process	References made participant relating to exceptional review,	1	1

Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (156 initial codes developed at phase 2)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
Managing whole-school relationships (differing opinions between SETs and Mainstream)	References made by participants relating to differing opinions of staff.	5	5
Mary I and 3rd level college WhatsApp groups (COP)	Reference made by participant relating to COP WhatsApp groups.	1	2
Moratorium on SENCO post of responsibilities	References made by participants related to the fact that there was a moratorium on posts of responsibility which would have applied to the SENCO role.	1	1
Multi-disciplinary Team collaboration	References made by participant relating to collaborations with teams of professionals.	1	3
Multiple Roles- Posts	References by participants regarding having more than one role along with SENCO duties.	7	14
Need for third level programme	References made by participants that there is a need for third level SENCO qualification.	8	16
New Model- COP	References made by participant relating to getting support from CoP on new model.	1	2
New SEN Policies in schools to reflect new practice post 2017	Reference made by participant that SEN policies were revisited due to new model and the changes in the COS.	1	1
No post of responsibility	Reference made by participant that SENCO would question doing the role if they had no post.	1	1
No SENCO role recognition and definition	References made by participants regarding the fact that there is no official SENCO role recognition and definition	4	5
Normalisation and lessen the difference	References made by the participants related to benefits of including SEN in mainstream schools.	6	6
Not engaged in specific professional learning that supports them in the SENCO role	References mad by participants that they have not engaged in PL to support there SENCO role	3	7
Organisation of student data using technology (Aladdin Google docs)	References made by participants regarding the use of technology, like Aladdin, to organise student data and files.	5	9

Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (156 initial codes developed at phase 2)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
Organising testing to follow guidelines on Irish exemptions.	References made by SENCOs on the responsibility of organising and setting up Irish exemptions.	3	5
Overseeing student support files	References made by participants relating to checking SSF.	5	8
Pastoral Role	Reference made by participant that the SENCO has pastoral role duties.	1	3
Post of Responsibility (POR)	References made by participant regarding a post of responsibility.	6	9
Pre school visits	Reference made by participants relating to visiting pre-schools.	1	1
Principal meeting and visiting other schools for ideas on SENCO duties and management	References made by participant relating to the principal visiting other schools for practices on SENCO duties.	1	1
Principal -SENCO thought on third level course giving staff ideas of staying in SENCO role for long periods	References made by participants on this	2	2
Principals idea of what leadership in SEN looks like	References made by participants regarding what leadership of SEN looks like.	3	6
Principals own decision to take SENCO role on for ease of management within role	References made by participant regarding holding onto role as they felt it would save time by SET teacher not having to work with a SENCO and then the SENCO having to work with the principal. Preferred Staff member on job share so no fit on staff for role.	2	5
Principals own decision to take SENCO role on for ease of management within role (2)	References made by participant regarding holding onto role as they felt it would save time by SET teacher not having to work with a SENCO and then the SENCO having to work with the principal. Preferred Staff member on job share so no fit on staff for role.	2	5
Principals thoughts on how the SENCO supports them in their role	Reference made by principals relating to how the SENCO supports them in their role.	3	9
Principals views on their SENCO	References made by the non-SENCO Principals on the SENCOs in their schools.	1	3
Professional learning as an enabler	References made by participants regarding professional learning supporting the SENCO to fulfil their role.	5	8

Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (156 initial codes developed at phase 2)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
Professional Learning on the New Model	References made by participants related to training and professional training on the new Model.	4	8
Qualifications giving SENCO credibility	References made by participants related to how SEN qualifications give the SENCO credibility.	3	3
Reporting to the board of management BOM	References made by participants related to reporting to the board of management.	3	4
Resistance to wanting to lead whole-school Initiatives	References made by participants related to not seeing a need to lead whole initiatives outside of their specific SET class.	2	2
Resource inventory and ordering	References made by participants related to conducting inventories on resources and the ordering of resources.	3	3
Rotation of qualified and staff with expertise in the SENCO role	References made by participant that there is difficulties in having to move staff that have expertise	1	1
Satisfied with external agencies (NEPS)	References made by participant that they are satisfied with NEPS coming into the school to advise.	2	2
School being supportive - funding PL	Reference made by participant relating to funding PL	2	2
School Culture Impacts Practice	References made by participants regarding school culture impacting practices in schools.	6	20
School Funding teachers to do a Master's in Special Education	References made by participant that school is funding 3 teachers to do a Master's in Special Ed to gain expertise in the area.	1	1
School identifying staff professional learning needs	References made by participant relating to identifying needs learning needs of staff.	2	3
School supporting Staff PL and funding PL	Reference made by participant relating to school support by way of funding PL	2	3
SEN issues being discussed at the BOM meetings	Reference made by participant that SEN issues are not discussed as a formality at BOM meetings.	4	6

Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (156 initial codes developed at phase 2)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
SEN Issues included on agenda of staff meetings	References made by participant regarding SEN being discussed at staff meetings.	5	7
SEN Policy- written SENCO duties	References made by participants regarding written SNCO duties.	1	3
SEN pupils challenged by integration into mainstream class	Reference made by participants that a challenge of including children with SEN in the school relates to the challenge on integrating the children with complex needs into mainstream.	1	1
SEN Team Subdivided	References made by participants related to division and organisation of SEN team, e.g. one set per class level or SEN team subdivided into teams.	2	3
SENCO Community of Practice- Benefits	References made by participants related to engaging with COPs.	5	14
SENCO Confidence	References made by participants regarding what makes a SENCO feel confident in their role.	3	7
SENCO Contact time - collaboration with Senior leadership team	References made by participant regarding meeting with SLT.	5	20
SENCO given specific time for SENCO duties	Reference made by participant regarding SENCO given time for SENCO duties.	2	2
SENCO Identity- How they view themselves	How SENCOS view themselves, their perception of who they are.	4	12
SENCO Professional Learning Needs	References made by participants to what they do not know.	6	9
SENCO providing SEN and staff professional learning	References made by participant regarding the SENCO providing PL for SEN and whole-school learning	2	5
SENCO responsibilities shared with principal	References made by participants related to duties of the SENCO being split between the SENCO and other staff/ management, such as deputy principal and principal.	7	38
SENCO responsibilities shared with principal (2)	References made by participants related to duties of the SENCO being split between the SENCO and other staff/ management, such as deputy principal and principal.	7	38
SENCO Role (Should there be Dedicated Post to SENCO only)	References made by participant regarding SENCO specific post- dedicated solely to SENCO	8	21

Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (156 initial codes developed at phase 2)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
SENCO Role (Should there be time allocated to non-teaching SENCO roles)	References made by participants regarding thoughts on whether there should be time allocated during the day for non-teaching SENCO roles.	6	15
SENCO Role (Should there be training given by DES in the future to upskill SENCOs to become SENCOs)	References made by participant relating to a dedicated course funded by DE to new SENCOs	2	2
SENCO role has many parts (teaching, managing SEN staff, coordinating SEN)	References made by participants related to the multiple parts of the SENCO role.	8	23
SENCO role- Lack of administration, co-ordination and collaboration time	References made by participants related to the lack of time for administrative, co-ordination and collaboration duties.	3	7
SENCO Role- Need to address the lack of policy Support from the Department on guidance on the duties of the role.	References made by participants relating to the department needing to outline the specific duties of the role.	6	11
SENCO Role- No official definition- recognition of role or specification of responsibilities	References made by participants related to no role recognition, definition or specification of responsibility.	3	10
SENCO role results in extensive workload	References made by participants indicating that SENCO roles and responsibilities result in an extensive workload.	7	16
SENCOs having Insufficient Time with SENIOR Leadership Team	References by participant that there is insufficient time with SLT.	1	1
SENCOs working outside school hours (during personal time)	References made by participants related to working at home, outside of school hours due to extensive workload.	6	14
SET teachers training-informing other SET teachers	References made by participants relating to sharing information on professional learning.	3	4
SET teachers used as subs for mainstream teachers- non SEN purposes	References made by participants regarding SET teachers being used for non-SEN purposes.	1	2
SET Team engaging in third level course in SEN	Reference made by participant that SET team are doing 3rd Level post grad following recommendations on WSE.	2	2

Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (156 initial codes developed at phase 2)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
Shared SETs between schools	References made by participants related to the fact that there can be shared SETs between schools.	1	1
Sharing of knowledge, expertise and ideas within staff	Reference made by participant regarding sharing information within the staff by means of meetings, teachmeet and discussions.	2	3
Specified purpose SET roles (EAL)	References made by participants regarding additional SET roles due to new students joining, such as Ukrainian students.	5	6
Staff challenged-Integrating children from special classes in mainstream classes.	References made by participant relating to integrating children that have ASD into mainstream classes.	1	1
Staff Collaboration Time (SETs and Mainstream teachers)	References made by participants regarding collaboration time for meetings (SETS and teachers).	7	15
Staff going to other schools to see new practices (STEM etc)	Reference made by participant that staff go to other schools in relation to PL.	2	4
Staff perception of SENCO	What the staff perceive the SENCO to be.	5	10
Staff Support and Collaboration	References made by participants related to the SENCO being enabled to fulfil role due having supportive and collaborative colleagues.	8	28
Staff unwilling to work in special classes	References made by participants that staff did not want to work with children in a special class.	2	4
Standardised Testing	References made by participants regarding ordering the standardised testing and compiling the results electronically and doing the returns for the department.	4	7
Suggestions for components of the 3rd level SENCO specific course	References made by participants relating to what should be included in a 3rd level course for SENCOS	6	16
Supportive relationship between principal and SENCO	References made by principal relating to supporting and praising the SENCO.	3	20

Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (156 initial codes developed at phase 2)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
Team Teaching	References made by participant regarding Team Teaching and SEN Provision.	4	7
Timetabling	References made by participants related to staff timetabling and the coordination of timetables.	8	13
Timetabling private diagnoses recommendations and Issues (Outdated advice)	References made by participants related challenges timetabling private diagnoses recommendations.	3	3
Training experienced SEN staff in new practices (difficulties in Change)	References made by participants on training staff that have been in SEN for years on new practices and the difficulties in change.	2	2
Training new staff in SEN	References made by participants about training new staff in SEN.	5	8
Training SEN Staff (Raising awareness of CPD)	References made by participants regarding training of SEN staff,	5	12
Training whole-school in SEN areas	References made by participants regarding whole-school training on SEN issues.	5	10
Training whole-school staff - (SEN section in staff Meeting) Staff professional learning	References made by participants related to sourcing, notifying, organising and conducting relevant professional learning.	7	10
Ultimate Responsibility- Principals overseeing SEN Provision	References made by participants that the principal oversees SEN provision throughout the use of the COS.	3	25
Unsatisfied with external agency supports in PL	References made by participants regarding not being satisfied with NCSE supports visiting the school.	1	1
Visiting other schools for PL	References made by participant relating to visiting the schools on whole-school initiatives.	5	5

APPENDIX 24³: Codebook\\Phase 3 Generating Initial Themes from Coded and Collated Data (Developing categories)

Phase 3 Generating initial themes from coded and collated data (26 initial themes developed from 156 initial codes)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
Benefits of including with pupils with SEN in mainstream schools	References made by participants related to the benefits of including pupils with SEN in mainstream schools.	7	9
Challenges in including pupils with SEN in schools	References made by participants regarding challenges of including pupils with SEN in their schools.	9	43
Collaboration	References made by participants related to collaborative practices within the school.	9	51
Evolving Role	Reference made by participants related to the evolving role of the SENCO,	6	9
Extensive Workload	References made by participants related to the extensive workload for SENCOs.	8	53
Impact of policy changes and events	References made by participants related to impact of policy changes and events on SEN provision and the SENCO role.	7	17
Inclusive Practices	References made by participants related to evidence of inclusive practices and SEN practices in the school.	9	56
Most important SENCO roles	References made by participants related to the most important SENCO roles.	9	42
Principals and SEN Provision	References made by participants related to principals and SEN provision.	6	17
Principals views on how they work with the SENCO role	Responses made by participants related to how the principal works with the SENCO role in their school.	9	124
Reasons for doing SENCO Role	References made by participants regarding how they became SENCO.	7	13
SEN and Staff Professional Learning	Reference made by participants related to the professional learning of SEN staff and staff in the area of SEN,	9	70
SENCO and Leading	References made by participants related to the extent that they lead SEN provision and strategy etc in the school.	9	84
SENCO Challenges within the role	References made by participants relating to challenges experienced by the SENCO in the execution of their role.	9	36

³ Codebook – Phase 3 – Searching for Themes – involved merging, renaming, distilling and clustering related coded into broader categories of codes to reconstruct the data into a framework that makes sense to further the analysis.

Phase 3 Generating initial themes from coded and collated data (26 initial themes developed from 156 initial codes)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
SENCO Community of Practice (COP)	References made by participants related to CoPs for SENCOs.	7	21
SENCO Future Vision of Role	References made by participants related to their future vision of the SENCO role.	9	54
SENCO Professional Learning	References made by participants related to SENCO professional learning.	9	68
SENCO Role Barriers	References made by the participants related to factors that acted as barriers to their SENCO role enactment.	9	56
SENCO Role Enablers	References made by participants related to factors that enabled them to execute their role.	9	41
SENCO Roles and Responsibilities	References made by participants related to the various SENCO roles and responsibilities.	9	137
SENCO Roles written into School SEN Policy	References made by participants regarding SENCO roles written into SEN policy.	1	3
SENCO Self-Perceptions, Confidence	References made by participants related to their SENCO self-perception and confidence.	4	19
SENCO Specific Third Level Course	References made by participants related to the need for and components of a SENCO specific third level postgraduate programme.	8	38
SENCO working with SLT	References made by participants related to working with the SLT.	8	65
SETAM	References made by participants related to SETAM and the impact on SEN provision and the SENCO role.	9	65
Staff Perceptions of SENCO role	References made by participants related to staff perceptions of the SENCO and their role.	5	13

APPENDIX 25⁴: Codebook\\ Phase 4 Developing and Reviewing Themes (coding on)

Phase 4 Developing and reviewing themes (26 initial themes consolidated into 10 reviewed themes)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
Impact of Policy Changes and SETAM	References made by participants relating to the impact of policy changes and SETAM.	9	91
Inclusive Practices	References made by participants relating to inclusive practices in their schools.	9	159
Perceptions of the SENCO Role - Staff and SENCOs' perceptions	References made by participants relating to how SENCOs' perceive their role and how staff perceive the SENCO role. Includes references made by SENCOs' regarding their confidence and reasons why they do the role.	7	45
Principals views on how they work with the SENCO role	References made by participants relating to how principals work with the SENCO role and their thoughts on the role.	9	141
Professional Learning	References made by participants relating to SENCO professional learning and SEN and staff professional learning in the area of SEN.	9	159
SENCO Future Vision	References made related to the future vision of the SENCO Role	9	92
SENCO Leading Aspects of SEN and Working with the SLT	References made by participants relating to the extent that SENCOs lead SEN and work with the Senior Leadership Team.	9	149
SENCO Role - Duties and Responsibilities	References made by the participants related to the SENCO roles and responsibilities. Includes references regarding the most important roles and the SENCOs' extensive workload.	9	235
SENCO Role Challenges and Barriers	References made by the participants related to the challenges and the barriers that the SENCOs' encounter in executing their role.	9	92
SENCO Role Enablers	References made by the participants related to factors that enabled SENCOs in executing their roles.	9	42

⁴ Codebook – Phase 4 – Reviewing Themes involved breaking down the now reorganised categories into sub-categories to better understand the meanings embedded therein.

APPENDIX 26⁵: Codebook\\Phase 5 Refining, Defining and Naming Themes (Developing a Thematic Framework)

Phase 5 Refining, defining, and naming themes (10 reviewed themes consolidated into 4 named and defined themes with 13 sub-themes)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
T1 - SENCOs are leading and managing schoolwide collaborative approaches to SEN provision	This theme relates to the roles and responsibilities of SENCOs in Irish primary schools.	9	370
T1.1 - SENCOs are leading the development and review of the school SEN policy	References made by participants relating to leading the development and review of the school SEN policy.	9	40
T1.2 - SENCOs are leading staff in SEN provision using school-wide systems	References made by participants relating to how they are leading staff in SEN provision using school-wide systems.	9	151
T1.3 - SENCOs are leading the identification of pupils with additional needs	References made by participants related to leading the identification of pupils with additional needs.	9	76
T1.4 - SENCOs are leading SEN and school initiatives	References made by participants relating to leading SEN and school initiatives.	9	49
T1.5 - SENCOs are leading staff development and professional learning within the area of SEN	References made by participants relating to leading staff development and professional learning within the area of SEN.	9	54
T2 - Experienced, knowledgeable and connected SENCOs are enabled by supportive staff and principals and a culture of collaboration	This theme relates to the enablers of SENCO role enactment.	9	363
T2.1 - SENCOs are experienced, knowledgeable and connected	References made by the participants related to their experience, knowledge, professional learning and to being connected through communities of practice.	9	128
T2.2 - Connected SENCOs are enabled by supportive staff and principals and a culture of collaboration	References made by participants related to being connected to staff, being supported by staff and Principals and related to a culture of collaboration supporting them in their role.	9	235

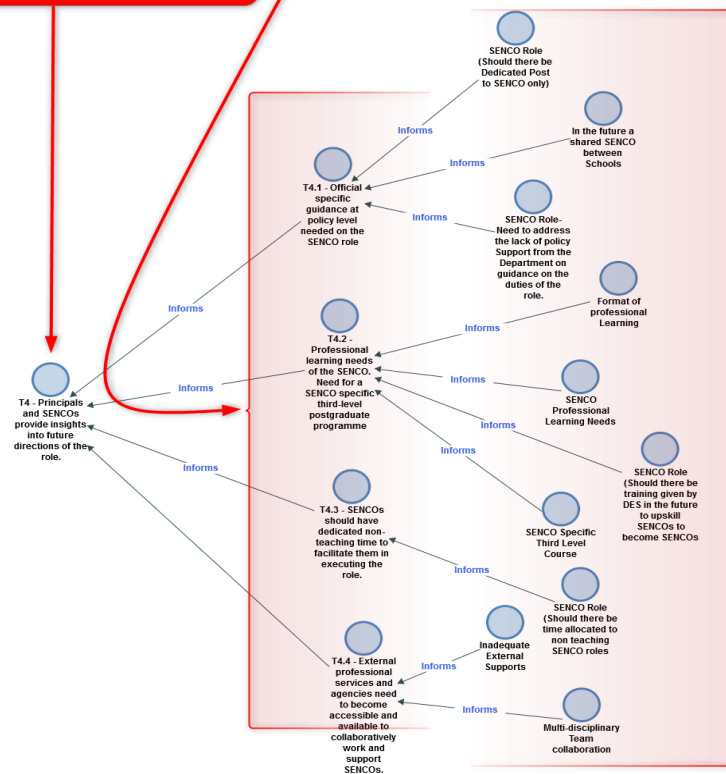
⁵ Codebook – Phase 5 – Defining and Naming Themes involved conceptually mapping and collapsing categories into a broader thematic framework.

Phase 5 Refining, defining, and naming themes (10 reviewed themes consolidated into 4 named and defined themes with 13 sub-themes)	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (rules for inclusion)	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
T3 - The extensive, nebulous nature of the SENCO role has evolved in a policy vacuum with insufficient time and inadequate support from external professional services.	This theme relates to the barriers to SENCO role enactment.	9	265
T3.1 - The extensive SENCO role is evolving in a policy vacuum with insufficient time to execute the role.	References made by participants relating to certain barriers to role enactment, namely extensive workload, nebulous nature of the role, lack of policy and a lack of time.	9	197
T3.2 - Inadequate external professional services leads to a fragmentation of support	References made by participants relating to inadequate support from external professional services.	9	68
T4 - Principals and SENCOs provide insights into future directions of the role.	This theme relates to the professional learning needs and supports needed for SENCOs to effectively enact their role.	9	138
T4.1 - Official specific guidance at policy level needed on the SENCO role	References made by participants relating to the need for guidance at policy level on the SENCO role.	9	34
T4.2 - Professional learning needs of the SENCO. Need for a SENCO specific third-level postgraduate programme	References made by participants related to the future vision of the SENCO Role regarding professional learning needs	9	61
T4.3 - SENCOs should have dedicated non-teaching time to facilitate them in executing the role.	References made by participants relating to the need for dedicated non-teaching time to facilitate them in executing the SENCO role.	6	15
T4.4 - External professional services and agencies need to become accessible and available to collaboratively work and support SENCOs.	References made by participants relating to the need for support from external professional services.	9	28

APPENDIX 27⁶: Example of flow from codes to initial themes/categories to themes

T4 - Principals and SENCOS provide insights into future directions of the role.

Sub-themes informing theme



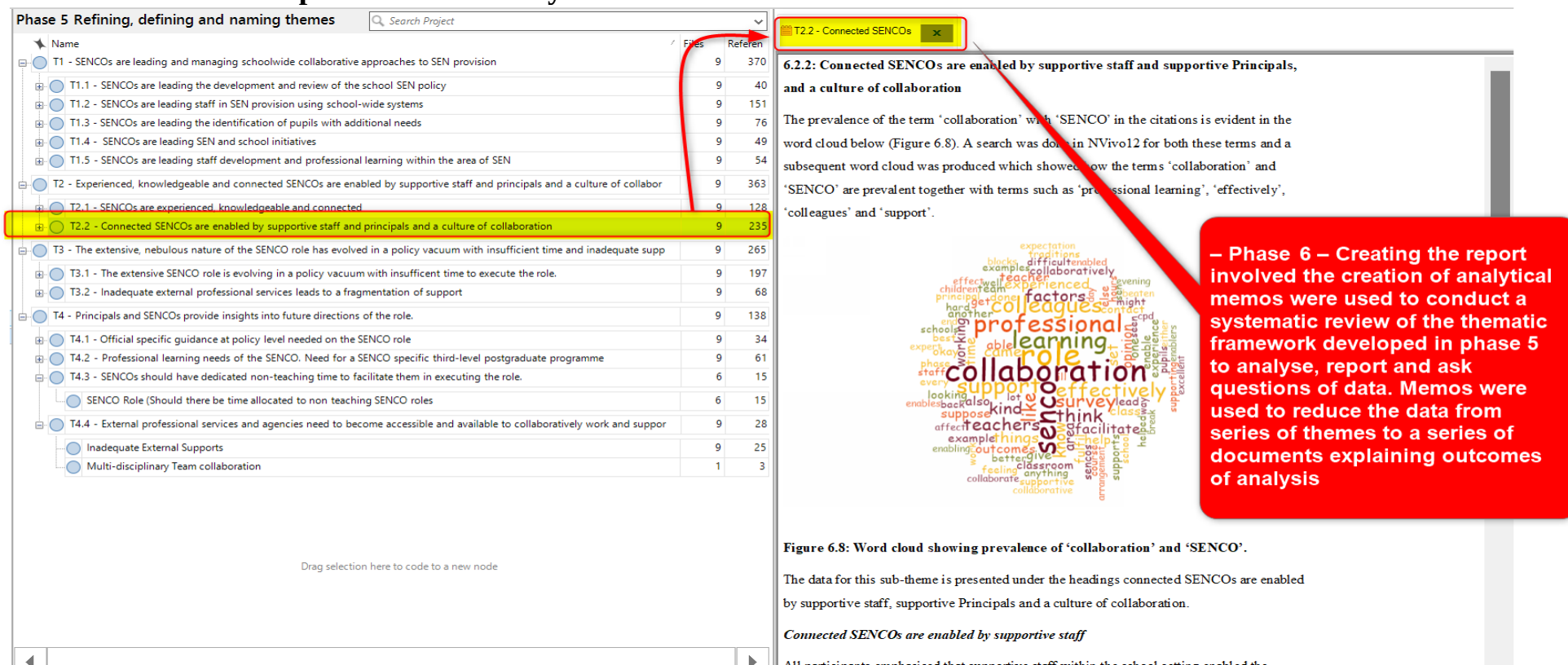
Codes informing sub-themes

⁶ Codebook – example of the flow from codes to categories to themes for T4: T4 - Principals and SENCOS provide insights into future directions of the role.

APPENDIX 28: Thematic Map



APPENDIX 29⁷: Example of the role Analytical Memo



⁷ Codebook – Phase 6 – Creating the report involved the creation of analytical memos were used to conduct a systematic review of the thematic framework developed in phase 5 to analyse, report and ask questions of data. Memos were used to reduce the data from series of themes to a series of documents explaining outcomes of analysis of theme content. Later, memos themselves were reduced through editing out overlapping and less important content to cohere findings into a cohesive findings chapter.

APPENDIX 30: Research diary excerpt from start of PhD journey

This excerpt is from the start of my PhD journey (October 2020). This section of the diary was used to document my thoughts and beliefs in relation to my position and my potential bias regarding the research area.

Research Diary:

15/10/2020

As I am currently working as a SET, and a member of the SEN team in a mainstream school, I acknowledge that I may bring some bias to this research. My views align with inclusive special education. I believe that the majority of pupils can and should be educated in mainstream classrooms and that there is a continuum of provision that meets a continuum of need for pupils with diverse and complex needs. I believe that placement along the continuum should allow movement between placements in response to pupils' strengths and needs.

Even though I have been a SET for ten years I do not hold any particular opinions on if there should be a SENCO role in Irish schools although I do question why SENCOs are formally recognised in other countries but not in Ireland. As I am not a SENCO myself, I think this may enable me to be more objective in my examination of the SENCO role in Ireland.

APPENDIX 31: Research diary excerpt post Phase Two data collection

This section of my research diary was used to record my observations and notes after the Phase Two interviews. Comments, such as these, from my diary were reflected upon during the data analysis.

Research Diary:
28/3/2023

Notes and comments following interviews with principals

- * Principal very open and positive to including pupils and meeting the needs of all pupils with additional needs.
- * Very much a collaborative culture in the school and spoke of this being more so in recent years, bringing in scheduled planning time on Fridays for SETs & C.Ts.
- * Huge respect for SENCO in the school, spoke of the enormity of the role, a military operation
- Acknowledgement of how the SENCO needs 30hrs in the day to do the job
- acknowledge that the SENCO is doing alot in their personal time and does that because they are so 'professional' (words of principal)
- acknowledged that this wouldn't probably be sustainable
- Very much trusts the SENCOs decision making as goes along with SENCOs ideas
- SENCO doing alot in a pastoral role, in meetings with parents (no home school liaison officer in school).

Research Diary: 30/3/2023

Notes & comments following interviews with SET & SENCOs

- * Explanation of a balancing act between leading the work within the SET team when working with children to identify the needs and then leading the organisation of the team to be in place to support the pupils, leading the processes of how to document the support and needs.
- * Time pressures to get to everything in the day & to get to pupils on year on timetable (facial expressions having a sense of frustration). SET/SENCO spoke of the difficulty to support all needs & all the staff & keep everything in order in terms of initiatives in the school - the SET/SENCO spoke of how children can be supported in these initiative or if decisions need to be made about new initiatives should start and how she makes those decisions.
- * Bringing work home all the time - The workload was described as being 'horrible' & 'never ending' (SENCOs words) spoke about working in the evenings, weekends, holidays - expressions of frustration but yet when speaking of the knowledge of the role, expression and voice sounded very confident.