Time, Expertise and Status: Barriers faced by Mainstream Primary School SENCos in the Pursuit of Providing Effective Provision for Children with SEND

Dr Mia D. Smith and Dr Karen E. Broomhead

School of Education, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, England

School of Education,

Liverpool John Moores University,

IM Marsh Campus,

Barkhill Road,

Aigburth,

Liverpool,

L17 6BD

M.D.Smith@ljmu.ac.uk

K.E.Broomhead@ljmu.ac.uk

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Abstract

The inclusion 'ideal' is one which has been both celebrated and maligned, as it not only paved the way for equality but out of its diversity has sprung many misconceptions and concerns for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). It is within this maelstrom of difficulty that the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) role is placed, resulting in those undertaking the position of SENCo facing numerous barriers in the pursuit of providing effective provision for children with SEND. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen SENCos employed at mainstream primary schools within the North West of England. Findings revealed conflict between how SENCos viewed their role and responsibilities, and the expectations that they perceived to be placed on them by parents of children with SEND and mainstream colleagues. This study brings to the fore the complexities of the role of the SENCo, and the continuing demands placed on these practitioners.

Keywords: special educational needs co-ordinator, SENCo, special educational needs, mainstream, inclusion

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Introduction

Historically, attitudes towards children with special educational needs and disability (SEND) were located within a medical deficit model of disability. The educational philosophy inherent prior to the Warnock Report (1978) created and maintained attitudinal barriers towards children with SEND being integrated into mainstream schools effectively. The publishing of the Warnock Report (HMSO, 1978) was an influential turning point for the conceptualisation of the education of children with SEND (Wall, 2011; Hayes, 2010; Stakes and Hornby, 1997), thus requiring schools to evolve practice and pedagogy to accommodate changes in school population and dynamics.

The evolution of an arguably functionalist inclusive policy agenda, trailing the Warnock Report, outpaced practice on the ground and indeed served to stall the implementation of mainstream inclusive practice (Hodkinson, 2010). Since it was first legislated in 1993, the role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) has had a lengthy linage evolving alongside such inclusive policy. This resulted in the responsibilities bound within the role becoming complex and diverse, with schools capacitating the role in various ways. The intention of this paper is to report such complexities SENCos face in the pursuit of providing effective provision for children with SEND.

The description of the role of the SENCo, as outlined by the Code of Practice (DfE/DoH 2014) illustrates an extremely wide and complex remit. The literature base, not least the Green Paper of 1993 and the voice of the SENCo themselves through research (e.g. Maher and Vickerman, 2018), provides an outline of the SENCo's role and responsibilities as complex and dynamic. Kearns' (2005) typology of SENCo role and responsibilities

particularly illustrates the wide remit taken on by those in this position (namely: arbiter, rescuer, auditor, collaborator and expert). At one level they are a lead trainer for a school, at another they coordinate provision across their institution. They too are tasked with providing expertise on individual children as well contending with bureaucratic hoops and governmental change and constraints. This, coupled with the concern that the majority of those undertaking the role are full-time teachers means, by default, the role becomes an 'extra' responsibility (Croll and Moses, 2000; Szwed, 2007). It seems reasonable to suggest that the complexity and diversity of the responsibilities upheld by SENCos, combined with deficits of time, may generate barriers in the pursuit of providing effective provision for children with SEND. Interestingly, Crowther *et al.*, (2001) found that the time allocated to SENCos to dispense their role had actually decreased from 1997, around the same time numbers of children classed as SEND entering mainstream increased considerably. Szwed's (2007) later research upholds this, indicating that 90 percent of SENCos cited a lack of time as their greatest challenge. These difficulties are compounded due to the fact that there are no national guidelines for time allocation, with the most recent Code of Practice merely stating that SENCo's require 'sufficient time' to fulfil their role (DfE/DoH 2014: 6.91). The time and range of duties for the SENCo therefore varies considerably between schools (Layton, 2005; MacKenzie, 2007). The demands of their primary role can cause SENCos to struggle with their workload and as a result, issues surrounding the manageability of the role may be questioned, causing increasing concern for SENCos with regards to their effectiveness.

Questions regarding the effectiveness of SENCos are further raised, by the fact that there is not only an assumption, but also a deep rooted traditional expectation that those who dispense the role are experts in the field of SEND (Rayner, 2007). Not only do school staff consider the SENCo to be an expert, parents can also hold this view with MacKenzie (2007: 213)

stating that, ‘parents regarded the SENCo as the repository of all knowledge, resources and contacts, whereby their children would receive appropriate support and teaching’, with some parents empowering SENCos to make decisions on their behalf (Maher, 2016). For some SENCos, such assumptions and expectations can prove daunting and overwhelming (Lightfoot *et al.* 2001); leaving them feeling under immense pressure to be the on-location ‘expert’ in all areas attaining to SEND (Kearns, 2005; MacBeath *et al.* 2006; Szwed, 2007; MacKenzie, 2007). Howe and Ball’s (2017) research regarding SENCos ability to provide care for children with brain injuries, suggest that SENCos should, where necessary, be provided with specialist training to increase their knowledge and expertise. Ironically, Kearns’ research (2005) suggests that only a minority of SENCos indeed consider themselves to be experts in the field and those who did, found themselves experiencing huge demands from other members of staff.

Alongside such dilemmas, the status of the SENCo role is also an area of concern. The Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2014), alongside other policy documents and literature (e.g. DfES, 2004; HMSO, 2006; Hallett *et al.,* 2010), recommend that SENCos should be an integral part of the Senior Management Team (SMT) in order to reflect the impetus placed on inclusion as a whole. However this is not always implemented on the ground (HMSO, 2006). Interestingly Pearson *et al*., (2015) highlighted that a major barrier for SENCos in the pursuit of effectively fulfilling their role is not being included on the SMT, with more recent research indicating that being on the SMT provides SENCos with an enhanced and valued voice with regards to whole-school strategic planning (Maher and Vickerman, 2018). Whilst progression in this area was witnessed in 2008, with the promise of legal requirements for schools to include SENCos on SMT, after consultation the regulations were changed from a requirement to a mere recommendation and therefore SENCos continue to be largely omitted

from SMT, thus becoming a focus of SEND related research (e.g. Tissot, 2013; Mitchel, 2014).

However where SENCos are indeed included on SMT, it fails to be a golden situation due to disconnect, confliction and ambiguity of promoting inclusive provision alongside strategic development across schools (Norwich, 2010; Done *et al*., 2016). Furthermore, some SENCos have indicated a desire not to be on SMT, as they consider their contribution of influencing an inclusive culture within their school to be sufficient alongside legal jurisdiction (Maher and Vickerman, 2018).

Therefore research study reported in this article, sought to explore the perceptions and experiences of mainstream primary school SENCos regarding the complexities of their role during their pursuit to provide effective educational support for pupils with SEND. Whilst previous literature has explored SENCo responsibilities, it is important to continue to reflect on this role considering the constantly changing landscape surrounding SEND and inclusion. The study reported in this article also intended to elicit SENCo experiences and reflections of their role, as well as how they felt positioned by those they worked closely with (mainstream colleagues and parents of children with SEND).

Methodology

This paper focuses on a specific group of practitioners who had intense and detailed experiences regarding their position on the 'front-line' supporting children with SEND and their families; fifteen SENCos employed in mainstream primary schools in the North West of

England; more specifically the West Cheshire and Merseyside areas. The researchers strove to explore the issues faced by SENCos during the operationalization of the role, within the broader context of governmental policy and uncertainty - a fluid and dynamic context. The fifteen SENCos interviewed had a range of experience within the role; three practitioners had served as SENCo for over fifteen years, whilst one SENCo had only worked in the role for nine months. Nine SENCos worked full time whilst the remaining six worked on a part time basis, with varying amounts of time specifically dedicated to their role as SENCo.

The research was approached via Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); a qualitative research perspective developed by Smith *et al.* (2009) which enables researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences. More specifically, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants. Interviews focused on participants' perceptions and experiences of their position as SENCo, as well as their relationships with parents and mainstream colleagues in relation to supporting the education and wellbeing of children with SEND. Interviews ranged from thirty minutes to over three hours in length. In terms of data analysis, the five-stage IPA process (Smith e*t al.* 2009) was followed. This involved: immersion in the data by reading and rereading the transcript; making descriptive, linguistic and conceptual remarks about the data (similar to a free textual analysis); developing emergent themes according to these initial comments; exploring connections across themes (consequently producing a table of themes for each participant), and finally; examining connections across all interviews and identifying key themes involving all participants.

With regards to ethics, guidelines produced by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) were adhered to. Written consent was obtained from all participants, and all SENCo's had the right to withdraw from the study, and to refrain from answering any questions during interviews (which did not occur during data generation).

Discussion

The overarching theme and hence reported on within this article was that of complexity, with the role reported to be a multitudinous complex web of responsibilities and conflicts. Consequently three sub themes were elicited which are reported in this article: (i) the perceived lack of time allocated to SENCo duties together with the internal and external complexities that this brought, (ii) confliction surrounding the ambiguity of 'expertise' and how SENCos did not feel comfortable adopting the role of 'expert' (contrasting with how they felt positioned by their mainstream colleagues and parents of children with SEND) and (iii) the impact of SENCos forming part of the SMT and the complexities that this caused in terms of status and prioritisation of inclusive matters. These three key sub themes are explored below in relation to previous literature.

Time (or lack of)

Time management is an issue predominantly raised through literature in this arena (Crowther *et al*., 2001; Cole, 2005; Szwed, 2007) and was indeed reflected in our sample; all SENCos responded that the role made it difficult to manage their time effectively and proportionally. Whilst each SENCo within the sample was allocated non-contact time for their SEND duties, similarly to Layton's (2005) indication, there was limited parity between the time-allocated to dispense their day-to-day duties (as Table 1 details). This was particularly interesting in light

of the participant schools having similar school demographics. However in terms of the SEND register there is a clear variance, differing from the commonly held view that time allocated to SENCos is in many cases a reflection of the size of the school, rather than the population of children on the SEND register (e.g. Szwed, 2007). In some cases, SENCos in our sample had been engaged in a lengthy battle between themselves and the SMT to be allocated time for the role. This was particularly the case for SENCo 10 who gave the SMT an ultimatum of leaving the role after six years if she continued to be denied any non-contact time, she explained how '… [I] literally did the whole of it at my own time at home' up until this point.

[Table 1]

Whilst all participants had non-contact time allocated to them, all SENCos interviewed unanimously highlighted how the time formally designated to their SEND duties was insufficient:

> SENCo 9: *'I've got a number of roles…SENCo is just one tiny role that takes over most of my life'*
>
> SENCo 1: *'time management is a huge issue…I don't think the role is valued…I mean I get three hours a week [dedicated to the SENCo role]…but I can spend every single day doing some SEN work on top of my class work…you can't just say well I'm only going to do it today, because it's an ongoing role'*
>
> SENCo 5: *'you can't get it done in that time allocated, it's usually a couple of nights a week, but a full day at the weekend I will be going through certain things'*

Regardless of the amount of time allocated to the position by the mainstream settings (ranging from just two hours to three days per week), they considered the time given to them for the SEND responsibilities insufficient. This was in direct confliction with the Code of Practice (DfE/DoH 2014: 6.91) which recommends that SENCos should be given 'sufficient time' to fulfil their duties. Nevertheless, it is interesting that the two SENCos who had been allocated the largest periods of time for their SEND duties (3 days and 2.5 days per week) had also held the position as SENCo for the longest amounts of time; a considerably lengthy 17 years and 23 years respectively. Tentative links could therefore be made here regarding SENCo time allocation and longevity of holding the position, although cause and effect cannot be established. Is it that as SENCos become more comfortable and confident in their role they are able to negotiate more time to be allocated to their SEND responsibilities and therefore feel able to continue as SENCo? This inevitably warrants further investigation.

Furthermore, several SENCos (both with and without full time teaching roles) questioned whether SENCo responsibilities could be effectively fulfilled whilst also teaching on a full time basis:

> SENCo 2: *'I don't think it's possible [to be a full time teacher in addition to SENCo] especially with all the developments…I don't know how they do it'*
>
> SENCo 9: '*I would find this role very difficult if I was a class teacher'*
>
> SENCo 15: *'yes I'm SENCo but I'm also a teacher with a class of my own, there's never enough time to do what you want to do, to give it your all, it just isn't possible, it's exhausting'*

The pressure of time was exacerbated particularly so for SENCos who were class teachers for the upper stages of key stage two, with the additional pressure of preparing children for SATs. Out of the sample, two SENCos were Year Six teachers and they both (without prompt) detailed the extra pressure felt from the demands of teaching this year group and interestingly indicated that the teaching post took precedence over their SEND responsibilities around the time of SATs:

> SENCo 5: *'SATs does block my progress as a SENCo and it probably affects my teaching more than it should because I've got the pressure of the SATs as well'*
>
> SENCo 9: *'I'm trying to teach 30 odd year 6s and to prepare them for SATs I haven't got enough time to do all the other roles'.*

The data indicates that where non-contact time is provided to teachers, there are nuances set against a backdrop of additional responsibilities taken on by SENCos that impede their ability to manage their role effectively - a continuing trend in research (Croll and Moses, 2000; Szwed, 2007). It is pertinent to highlight that all participants had other responsibilities in addition to their SENCo position; predominantly as full time class teachers but also as co-ordinators for issues such as ICT; child protection; looked-after children; sustainable schooling; assessment and creative curriculum. This immediately raises questions regarding whether the role of the SENCo, and indeed the education of children with SEND, is prioritised within mainstream settings.

The complexities surrounding SENCo as 'expert'

A conspectus of the literature indicates that the major challenge facing SENCos is their role as the 'school expert'. Indeed, many of the SENCos within our study expressed doubts regarding their knowledge and capability in the field of SEND (concurring with Kearns' 2005 study). SENCos reported how parents and mainstream colleagues held them in high regard for SEND related issues, which consequently resulted in participants experiencing pressure in relation to how they were deemed to be experts. Yet, many SENCos did not perceive themselves to be experts, indeed quite the opposite was reported:

> SENCo 1: *'they [teaching staff] presume because I'm SENCo that I'll know what to do and that just doesn't happen because I don't know what to do…blind leading the blind'*
>
> SENCo 4: *'I wouldn't class myself as an expert…we just do our best'*
>
> SENCo 8: *'I try my best to read up on things but there just isn't the time, I'm not an expert here, I'm just trying my best for the children'*
>
> SENCo 13: *'at the end of the day you think as a SENCo I'm not an expert, I'm just doing my best…so you know you're working really hard but you're treading water almost'*

Such complexities and conflict left the SENCos, as one SENCo (13) put it, *'treading water'* during the pursuit for suitable provision for their pupils with SEND. Sadly, this culminated in two participants (who had held the role for 10 years and 7 years respectively) revealing how they would shortly be resigning from their position as SENCo.

In the main, the participants who displayed more confidence in response to the research questions had been in the position for longer periods of time. A large proportion of the participants contended that expertise does not come as result of formal training but rather from day to day experience of the role, with SENCo 4 detailing how the day-to-day experience of undertaking the role provides the expertise. In the main, the findings painted a

clear picture that the majority of SENCos did not class themselves as an expert in the field of SEND and found the post difficult to fulfil effectively (as reflected by the work of Szwed, 2007; McKenzie, 2007). These struggles faced by SENCos indeed have ramifications on how they conduct their role and additionally, the longevity of the post held. A common theme that emerged was the assumption from staff that the responsibility for children with SEND was that solely of the SENCo but the participants highlighted the need for a whole school approach to inclusion.

Perhaps most concerning and not as heavily documented within the literature, was the perceived lack of understanding from mainstream colleagues, who appeared to reinforce the assumption that SENCos were the sole SEND experts:

> SENCo 3: *'some staff think yes you're the expert and come to you'*
>
> SENCo 7: *'it's hard because you've got teachers coming to you and they expect you to be an expert on thousands of different things'*
>
> SENCo 11: *'they think you can solve the problem immediately as SENCo'*

This led to SENCos highlighting how mainstream colleagues '*passed the buck*' (SENCo 14) with regards to SEND-related issues, which in turn has implications on the use of their already constrained time. However what is difficult to establish here, is whether signposting SEND related issues to the SENCo is due to a lack of confidence on the teacher's behalf or if teachers too are under immense pressure of their own and therefore have little time for SEND-related issues, resulting in such signposting:

SENCo 11: *'when things are getting difficult they do turn to me and say… 'what are you going to do about it?''*

SENCo 12: *'I would expect classroom teachers to try and solve problems themselves, but sometimes they don't…colleagues are very demanding of my time because basically they want you to do it for them…you get some colleagues who are very good and conscientious, but other colleagues want it all on a plate and SEN is a nuisance to them'*

SENCo 13: *'staff will hand issues over to me when they should be dealing with them'*

SENCo 14: *'I think some teachers wrongly pass the buck, pass responsibility, you're the SENCo I want you to deal with it'*

SENCo 15: *'colleagues say you know 'oh Billy has kicked off again in class, what are you going to do?', I'm seen as the one who should solve this issue when actually, the teacher needs to be taking responsibility, every teacher is a teacher of children with special needs'*

SENCo 15's statement *'every teacher is a teacher of children with special needs'* appeared to be at the heart of the issue here; that mainstream colleagues were not necessarily prioritising SEND in the classroom and acknowledging their key role in supporting these pupils. The idea of 'SENCo as sole expert', deemed to be solely responsible for all SEND-related issues, contrasted with how SENCos themselves actually viewed their position.

Following on from this, the findings suggest that it is not only mainstream colleagues that considered the SENCo to be an expert in SEND. According to the sample parents also held this view, with SENCo 13 commenting that, *'parents think that you're the fountain of all knowledge'*. Whilst, encouragingly, the majority of the sample indicated that relationships with parents are on the whole positive, with SENCo 6 indicating that *'99% of the time the*

children's parents are well behind you'; there appeared to be some issues stemming from parental perception that the SENCo is indeed the 'expert'. It was perceived by the sample that parents can often hold the SENCo wholly accountable if they deemed their child to be receiving inadequate special educational provision and/or intervention:

> SENCo 5: *'there's parents that think I don't do my job properly or that I'm not doing enough for their children'*
>
> SENCo 6: *'parents get upset, frustrated when they don't think things are happening for their child, and…they take that out on me…when actually I'm doing my damn best over here'*

Participants suggested that this was due to parents being unaware of funding and resource constraints as well as delays from external agencies:

> SENCo 12: *'sometimes it's hard not to say [to parents] well actually I'm cheesed off myself because I've rang this person, that person, I've filled in this form, that form…and I'm not getting any results…you try to explain the system that's in place and you tactfully try to explain procedures, but then being a professional it's very difficult you can't say too much, so you can't say well I've rang so and so but they're actually pretty hopeless and I might not hear from them for the next six months, or that organisation is a load of rubbish'*

What appeared to come through the study was how a large proportion of SENCos clearly outlined that they did not feel like experts on SEND at all, and were rather simply 'trying their best' in extremely challenging circumstances.

Status: SENCo as part of SMT

As Table 1 indicates, seven of the fifteen SENCos interviewed were members of SMT. However it is important to note that two members of the sample also held the role of deputy head, which may account for their position on SMT. Recommendations for SENCos to be part of SMT, and the positives attributes of this were detailed by the sample with a particular focus on the audibility of voice:

> SENCo 4: *'I think no matter what you say your voice is always heard slightly more if you're on the senior management team…that's where all the decisions are made aren't they'*

The comments from the sample predominately indicated the benefits for SENCos to have SMT status (as also suggested by Hallett *et al*., 2010; Pearson et al., 2015; DfES, 2004 and DfE/DoH, 2014) in order to raise the inclusive agenda at SMT level, influence decision-making and development of in-house SEND policy. Interestingly, SENCo 8 noted a change in attitude from colleagues and the ability to access information more efficiently when moving onto the SMT, noting it as a clear positive.

Whilst a number of SENCos expressed a clear advantage of being part of SMT for the progression of their role, this was not always without its challenges with a number of issues being highlighted:

> *SENCo 7: 'the two roles do clash against each other sometimes … because you can be fighting for a particular child but you know the budget as a deputy … when you're on the senior management you also know some more constraints … I think sometimes it would help not knowing those because I'd like to come in as the left-winger and really fight the cause of a child without knowing as to why a political decision has been made'.*

The main issue emerging from the findings related to how the position of SENCo was actually a conflict of interest with a SMT role. SENCo 7 (above) illustrated clearly the disconnect and confliction between strategic school development and promoting inclusive practice that Norwich (2010) and Done *et al*., (2016) postulate. Whilst inclusion on SMT for SENCos can be considered a step forward, there are indeed limitations attached to such status for SENCos and therefore should be considered with caution.

Concluding Thoughts

Interviews with SENCos highlighted interesting perceptions and experiences regarding their roles and responsibilities, which contrasted with the expectations and pressures placed on them by parents of children with SEND and their mainstream colleagues.

More specifically, SENCos unanimously reported that they did not have enough time allocated to the role to fulfil their SEND responsibilities. Evidently, the Code of Practice's recommendation of 'sufficient time' (DfE/DoH 2014) needs to be more specific, with a nationally and/or locally agreed allocation of time for the SENCo role (potentially based on the school population or SEND register). There is also opportunity to explore potential links between the amount of time allocated to SENCo responsibilities and longevity of holding the SENCo position. It was noted that SENCos within the study who had the largest time allocation for their SEND duties had held the post for considerably longer periods of time. It could therefore be speculated that staff turnover for SENCo positions may be lower if the role and its complexities are understood and prioritised within mainstream schools. However, further research is essential.

In addition to this, SENCos discussed how they were often perceived to be experts on SEND-related issues by mainstream colleagues and parents of children with SEND. This resulted in SENCos reporting how they experienced intense pressure (from mainstream colleagues) in terms of 'fixing' issues within classes where children with SEND were concerned, as well as expectations from parents to address all difficulties that their children were experiencing with regards to their education. This conflicted with how SENCos perceived the role themselves; that they were not experts, but rather 'trying their best' in extremely demanding circumstances within the constraints of government, where only a limited amount of time was able to be dedicated to the position. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to break down the concept of expertise, SENCos may have been positioned as experts in comparison to their mainstream colleagues due to their additional training and other day to day experiences of working on SEND matters with children, families and professionals. It is also beyond the scope of this paper to explore the impact of recent changes in terms of training for SENCos, as the study reported in this article was concerned with perceptions of expertise rather than actual quantified levels of knowledge. However, as SENCos did question their expertise and professional knowledge, it does suggest a need to reflect on the effect of training and support on the ground.

On the other hand, a whole school approach to, and ethos regarding, the understanding and prioritisation of inclusion is imperative. Every teacher is responsible for gaining knowledge and understanding of SEND related issues, and therefore SEND must be regarded as a whole school concern. SENCos forming part of the SMT of their school may enable this to occur

more easily, or at least be further acknowledged, as inclusion and SEND may be given a higher priority (reported by several SENCos in the study). Despite the Code of Practice (DfE/DoH 2014) suggesting that the SENCo has a key role to play in terms of development of provision for children with SEND, and that their contribution on the SMT of the school would be beneficial, this is merely a suggestion and SENCos are not always present on the SMT. Again, a nationally and/or locally agreed policy clarifying whether SENCos should be present on the SMT would be helpful, in order to aid the prioritisation of SEND matters within mainstream schools.

Finally, it is concerning that several SENCos with full time teaching responsibilities in the upper stages of Key Stage Two reported that their duties towards children with SEND fell to the wayside at certain points of the year, due to the pressure and prioritisation of SATs. Whilst it must be acknowledged that resources are limited, and teachers have a wealth of experience to bring to the SENCo role, this does raise the following question: is it achievable or sustainable for SENCos to also be full time class teachers, let alone full-time class teachers at the upper stages of Key Stage Two where SATs loom large?

What is evidently required is a 'top-down' approach for further change. The most recent Code of Practice (DfE/DoH 2014) was seen by many as an opportunity to revolutionise and clarify the SEND system within the UK, and more specifically the role of the SENCo. The Code of Practice provides some input with regards to SENCo duties and responsibilities, and yet makes vague statements such as SENCos requiring 'sufficient time' (6.91), providing 'professional guidance' (6.89) rather than expertise or knowledge, and will be 'most effective…if they are part of the school leadership team (6.87)'. Whilst acknowledging the

need for autonomy for SENCos and their role, these ambiguities need to be critiqued further in terms of how this can actually be implemented in practice; for example, what does 'sufficient time' actually look like or mean?

This study has provided a qualitative insight into the perceptions and experiences of fifteen SENCos in the North West of England. Detailed experiences regarding the internal conflicts and complexities of the role were brought to the forefront. This highlighted the need to continue to prioritise SENCo support, whilst also recognising that the inclusion of children with SEND within mainstream schools is a key role of *all* educational practitioners; after all, every teacher is a teacher of children with SEND.

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