

Inclusion at Any Price? Exploring the Challenges and Opportunities of the Contemporary Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator

Gemma McCabe¹⁾

University College London

Abstract

This article explores the role of the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator (SENDCo) in England. It reports findings from a qualitative interview study with a range of contemporary SENDCo practitioners and leaders. Utilising a social constructivist research approach, it explores their knowledge and experience of the SENDCo role, its implementation and the challenges associated with administering the role in the current policy context. This study forms one component of a broader research project. The objective of this paper is to explore the experiences encountered by contemporary SENDCos and leaders of SEND, as well as to present the findings of a small-scale study on the management of this role within primary schools. Initially, a narrative literature review is undertaken, and four key themes are identified: inclusion, identity, leading change and challenge. This paper expands on two of these themes- inclusion and challenge. Data from the interviews highlighted five key themes- leading SEND, inclusion, role pressure, changes to the role and the future of the SENDCo role. In this paper, data specifically addressing the areas of inclusion and role pressure are focused upon. Limitations of the study are discussed as well as possible areas for further research.

Keywords : *SENDCo, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), Inclusive, High-Level Needs (HLN), Leadership in SEND, Emotional labour, Workload and role complexity inclusion, England.*

Corresponding author, ¹⁾ Gem.caylun@hotmail.co.uk

Background

In England, there has been a gradual shift towards greater inclusion of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) into mainstream schools. The individual in charge of implementing SEND policy in schools is the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator (SENDCo) (Curran and Boddison, 2021; Rosen-Webb, 2011). To fully understand the contemporary positioning of the SENDCo role, it is helpful to consider the historical trajectory of SEND provision within England. The 1970 Education Act mandated that all local authorities provide educational opportunities to all residents, regardless of their needs (Lindsay, et al, 2020). In 1974 the Warnock Committee was established to investigate educational opportunities for disabled children in England, Scotland, and Wales. In 1978, the Committee published the first major review of the provisions for SEND in England, resulting in significant changes in the perception of SEND education (Szwed, 2007). The subsequent Warnock Report was a significant milestone for educating children and young people with SEND in England and internationally. Legislation, such as the Education Act 1981 (Castro-Kemp, et al., 2019), and the 1994 Special Education Code of Practice, have further expanded on these principles (Tyso, et al., 2021).

In 1994, the UK government, ninety-two other governments, and twenty-five international organisations signed the Salamanca Statement, emphasising the need to include all children in the regular educational system, regardless of their additional needs (Nutbrown and Clough, 2004, Runswick-Cole and Hodge, 2009)- representing a significant international commitment to implement inclusive education in mainstream schools (Glazzard, 2013). The 1994 Special Educational Needs Code of Practice became the first national document on managing SEND provision (Rosen-Webb, 2011), mandating schools to employ a specialist teacher as the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) (Tissot, 2013).

In subsequent years the support systems for children and young people with SEND received strong criticism for their shortcomings. Several reports in England between 2009 and 2011, including the Lamb Inquiry, the Ofsted report “A Statement is Not Enough,” and the Green Paper “Support and Aspiration,” highlighted the challenges faced by young people and families (DfE, 2011) including; parents having to fight to access services and support, length of time to get assessments, inconsistent collaboration between services and lack of

available resources (Starkie, 2024, Szwed, 2007; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Tissot, 2013; Curran, 2019; Curran and Boddison, 2021).

In 2014 and 2015, the SEND education system underwent significant changes with the introduction of the Children and Families Act and SEND Code of Practice. Terminology changed from “special educational needs” (SEN) to “special educational needs and/or disabilities” (SEND) (DfE and DH, 2015). SENCOs were now referred to as SENDCOs. These reforms were hailed by the DfE and DH, (2015), as the biggest education reforms in a generation- with responsibility falling to the schools' SENDCOs for implementation (Rosen-Webb, 2011).

Current Context: Is Positive Change Afoot?

In the last decade, there have been significant reforms in SEND education, although contemporary evidence suggests that the current policy is not achieving its goals (Azpitarte and Holt, 2024). Reports highlight concerns about the emphasis on procedural aspects over cultural change, inconsistencies in delivery, and struggles in effective implementation at local level (Curran et al., 2017; OFSTED 2018; Sales and Vincent 2018; Ofsted, 2021). Currently, SEND provisions are being reviewed via the Children's Social Care Implementation Strategy and Disability Action Plan (2023), which outlines a vision for inclusion and the Green Paper 'Right Support, Right Place, Right Time' (DfE, 2022). The 'Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan Right Support, Right Place, Right Time' (DfE, 2023) states that it aims to create a more inclusive society. To achieve the improvement plan's goals, the government rightly acknowledges that it needs to 'be more ambitious in reimagining a society that is inclusive at every level' (DfE, 2023, p.24). The plan acknowledges that inclusivity extends beyond the classroom and requires cultural change, however, fails to address the process of implementing comprehensive cultural change. Peterson and Deal (1998) argue that culture comprises the collective norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that evolve over time. Reimagining a society will take time; new norms, beliefs and traditions need to be established and embedded before meaningful cultural change can occur.

This perspective aligns with recent international policy directions. UNESCO's (2023) *Guidance for Inclusive Education Systems* emphasises that inclusion is fundamentally a cultural endeavour requiring transformation of school ethos, relational practices, and community engagement, not merely the revision of procedural mechanisms. Similarly, the OECD's *Education for Inclusive Societies* framework positions inclusion as an ongoing cultural process that depends on shared values, collective responsibility, and sustained leadership across whole systems. When viewed through these frameworks, the current English reforms appear to advocate cultural change rhetorically but provide limited detail on how such deep cultural work is to be enacted or supported in practice.

Factors Impacting the Current Role of SENDCos

A narrative literature review was undertaken, and four key themes were identified: inclusion, identity, leading change, and challenge. In this paper, the focus is on exploring two of those key themes: inclusion and challenges.

Inclusion

One of the key themes identified in the literature reviewed is "inclusion" - playing a significant role in shaping the current responsibilities of the SENDCo, both internally and externally. Promoting inclusion encompasses managing external pressures to implement a cultural shift, alongside addressing the internal challenges at the grassroots level.

In recent years, the definition of inclusion has undergone significant changes and developments. Current legislation dictates that most children in England with SEND will be educated in mainstream schools (DfE, 2015). Kart and Kart (2021) argue that inclusive education is educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms with their peers without disabilities. In practical terms, inclusion is defined as a school implementing a radical set of changes through a systematic review to ensure that all children are wholeheartedly embraced (Curran and Boddison, 2021). Although, Sandoval, et al., (2021) propose a more comprehensive concept, indicating that inclusion can serve as a catalyst for societal transformation.

It is important to distinguish inclusion from the older concept of "integration," as these

terms are sometimes used interchangeably in international discourse. Within the UK policy context, integration historically referred to placing children with SEND in mainstream schools without fundamentally adapting pedagogy, environment, or culture (Ainscow and Dyson 2006). In contrast, inclusion—as framed in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) and reinforced through the SEND and AP Improvement Plan (DfE, 2023)—requires proactive, whole-school restructuring so that the school itself adapts to the learner, rather than expecting the learner to fit existing structures. This distinction is central to understanding the UK's contemporary expectations of SENDCOs, whose role involves leading the organisational and cultural change associated with inclusion rather than simply managing pupil placement.

The inclusion of children with SEND in mainstream settings is becoming increasingly common in England and internationally (Lee and Recchia, 2016; Szwed, 2007) as inclusion has been established as a core value in international policy arenas e.g., UNESCO 1994. Liasidou and Svensson (2013) argue that inclusive education aims to respond to student diversity in socially just and democratic ways, constituting a conceptual revolution for educational restructuring. Tomlinson (2015) suggests that human rights and social justice agendas underpin the drive towards a fully inclusive education system. Runswick-Cole and Hodge (2009) advocated adopting the term "educational rights" in lieu of "special educational needs," positing that emphasising rights rather than needs is pivotal in establishing an inclusive educational climate and shifting the focus from individual deficits to facilitating the learning of all children and valuing multiple forms of intelligence.

Following the production of policies in SEND, as noted above, schools have significantly transformed their approach to education. Both Lee and Recchia (2016) and Curran and Boddison's (2021) research highlighted calls for re-evaluating traditional classroom structures and teaching methods to give every student an equal opportunity to learn. Erwin and Guintini, (2000) argue that a truly inclusive environment can only be established when a broad range of abilities are accepted as natural and necessary for creating a rich and diverse society.

Although inclusion has featured prominently on government agendas for many years—and remains a central pillar of the most recent SEND reforms—it continues to be widely debated within schools both nationally and internationally (Sandoval et al., 2021). A

substantial body of research has identified the ongoing challenges associated with embedding inclusive practices (Cole, 2005; Haug, 1999; Nilholm & Alm, 2010; Szwed, 2007). Similarly, a number of scholars (Ainscow, 2018; Isaksson et al., 2007) point to the persistence of deficit-oriented thinking within special needs education, where difficulties are too often understood as individual shortcomings rather than as responses shaped by school structures, expectations, or broader systemic constraints (Lindqvist et al., 2011).

Szwed (2007) argues that these shifting paradigms have significant implications for staff in mainstream schools. Warnes, et al., (2022) conducted a survey-based investigation into teacher attitudes and concerns surrounding inclusion, finding that inclusive education is a complex field which teachers often find challenging to navigate. Findings from their survey indicated that children with SEND are at risk of being perceived as an onerous addition to an already stressful regular teaching role. This study was constrained to utilising online survey data collection because of the COVID-19 lockdown conditions, which precluded the use of other data collection methods such as interviews or observations for validation purposes. In a comparable study by Abongdia, et al., (2015), however, semi-structured interviews and observations were employed to evaluate teachers' perspectives on obstacles to inclusive education. Their findings reveal inadequacies in effective teacher training, approaches to student identification, overcrowded classrooms, limited parental involvement, and a deficiency of collaboration among educators.

The development of inclusive education has also been hindered by difficulties in both defining it and gaining full government acceptance for it (Hodkinson, 2019). The shift towards inclusion in recent years has seen an increase in the number of children with additional needs learning alongside their peers in mainstream settings, leading researchers to investigate the impact of inclusive education on children who do not have SEND. Kart and Kart (2021) conducted a literature review and found that there is considerable research exploring the advantages of inclusive education for children with SEND; however, there is a lack of understanding about how inclusive education affects children who do not have SEND. Their literature review analysed forty-seven articles that investigated the effects of inclusion on non-SEND children. The literature they reviewed indicated a predominantly positive or neutral impact of inclusion on the academic performance of 'typically developing' children during their early years. Inclusive environments were particularly beneficial for non-SEND

children, as they helped reduce the fear of disability and improved their tolerance and understanding towards difference (Salend and Garrick Duhaney, 1999). The authors of the study, however, acknowledge potential limitations including insufficient search terms, a focus only on peer-reviewed studies, and the possibility of different interpretations of findings.

Challenges

Despite existing for thirty years, the SENDCo role remains complex and misunderstood (Curran, 2019). The literature has identified numerous challenges regarding the role of SENDCos - including financial constraints, liaising with other staff and external agencies, dealing with bureaucracy, adapting to the ever-changing role descriptors, and a reduction in support from external services (Rosen-Webb, 2011; Szwed, 2007; Tysoe, et al., 2021). In addition, further challenges that SENDCos face were discussed; the role's operation, time allocation and statutes (Dobson and Douglas, 2018; Pulsford, 2020; Curran, 2019; Tissot, 2013; Rosen-Webb, 2011).

Curran (2021) identifies a significant additional challenge: the diverse interpretation and implementation of responsibilities as stipulated in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DH, 2015) across various settings. Curran (2019) previously addressed this issue by investigating the experiences of SENDCos as policy actors during a policy reform. These research findings indicate that the 2015 Code lacked guidance and clarity, leading SENDCos to interpret the guidance in their own ways. Recent policy reforms may further impact the role's already complex challenges (Curran and Boddison, 2021). Studies indicate a noticeable gap between the intended policy and the actual implementation of the SENDCo role in daily practice. This discrepancy highlights a failure in policy directives to address the practical realities of the current education system (Curran, 2021; Maher and Vickerman, 2018). This persistent policy–practice gap aligns with broader international concerns. Maher and Vickerman (2018) argue that ambitious inclusion policies frequently fall short in practice when they are not accompanied by sufficient funding, training or operational guidance—an issue strongly reflected in SENDCos' accounts of resource shortages and workload strain.

Additional challenges discussed in the literature are the multiple roles of the SENDCo (Curran and Boddison, 2021) and time management (Smith and Broomhead, 2019). Dobson

teachers. Rosen-Webb (2011) suggests that the SENDCo role is generally given in addition to other roles, such as Safeguarding Lead, Looked After Child Lead, and English as Additional Language Lead (Curran and Boddison, 2021). Classroom teachers often struggle to find time for their SENDCo responsibilities due to their busy schedules (Tissot, 2013). Szwed (2007), found that even SENDCos who are not assigned specific class responsibilities struggle to find time to meet and discuss provisions with class teachers due to the added and often changing educational needs requirements. The SEND Code of Practice states that SENDCos should have sufficient time to conduct their duties as SENDCos. Smith and Broomhead (2019), however, suggest that the Code should have a more specific time allocation agreed locally or nationally for the role. Furthermore, another significant challenge in fulfilling the SENDCo role is the substantial volume of administrative tasks, paperwork, and form completion required (Tyso, et al., 2021; Szwed, 2007), thereby adding pressure to an already time-sensitive role. These challenges reflect wider systemic pressures. Ainscow (2018) highlights rising levels of teacher burnout internationally as schools attempt to meet increasingly complex learner needs without proportional increases in structural support—mirroring the emotional strain, workload overload and stress described by SENDCos in this study.

Challenges echo those experienced in comparable roles internationally: for example, Irish SEN Coordinators report similarly heavy administrative burdens and ambiguity surrounding leadership expectations (Rose, Shevlin and Winter, 2017, O’Gorman and Drudy, 2010), while Scottish ASN Coordinators face comparable tensions between statutory duties, the inability to deliver the relevant support prescribed by legislation and limited time or resources, (Scottish ASL Review, 2020, Scottish Parliament Education Committee, 2017, Perry and Boylan, 2018). Such parallels illustrate that the complexities faced by English SENDCos are not isolated phenomena but part of broader systemic pressures shaping inclusion leadership across different educational jurisdictions.

The Present Study

This qualitative study explores the role of the contemporary SENDCo by interviewing six SENDCos and two senior leaders, seeking to shed light on their experiences of the role. The

SEND provision in England is undergoing another reform just ten years after the last major change. The reason for the reform is that the system is still not meeting the needs of children and families with SEND. The person responsible for implementing any form of policy change in schools is the SENDCo (Rosen-Web, 2011). The role of the SENDCo has shifted towards a more organisational focus, requiring the delivery of inclusive school cultures as a compliance matter (Done, et al., 2016). In recent years, the role of the SENDCo has been enhanced and given a higher profile in national policy (Robertson, 2012) with their role being described as ‘senior and strategic’ (DfE, 2023, p. 60). This study sets out to explore how recent changes have impacted on current practices.

Methodology

The primary aim of this study was to explore the experiences associated with the SENDCo role. In addressing this aim, it was important to gather data that captured the human interpretation of the role of SENDCo, instead of pursuing a singular objective. To meet the expressed purposes of this small-scale research study, I adopted the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methods to seek to unveil reality by gathering individuals' experiences, understandings, and perceptions (Thanh and Thanh, 2015). As all participants were employed within the same Multi-Academy Trust, I recognised that this sampling context may limit the wider transferability of findings; however, the shared organisational environment also enabled in-depth exploration of experiences situated within a consistent policy and leadership framework

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six practising SENDCos and two senior leaders. The approach facilitated the collection of diverse experiences from differing educational settings and staff with varying levels of knowledge and experience in the capacity of SENDCo or senior leaders managing SENDCos. In keeping with Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, analysis followed the six phases (familiarisation; generating initial codes; searching, reviewing and defining/naming themes; and producing the report) but these were operationalised reflexively: transcripts were read multiple times with analytic memos written after each reading to capture early impressions and decisions.

Positionality

As a practising Early Years Lead within the same trust as the participants, I am aware that I am positioned as both an insider and an outsider in the research process (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Bukamal, 2022). As an insider, I share an affiliation with the participants due to working within the same Trust while simultaneously occupying an outsider position by not assuming the role of a SENDCo. As three participants in the study were employed at the same school as me, it was particularly important to explore any potential role conflict. Role conflict may arise when a researcher responds to events, or analyses data from a perspective that differs from their role as a researcher (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). As a researcher, I recognised the need to explicitly separate my roles as a colleague and an employee from my role as a researcher. To address these issues, it was made explicit to participants at the start of all interviews that in the interviews I adopted the role of a researcher – rather than a colleague - thereby emphasising the distinction between a colleague and researcher (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). This dual positionality was significant: my insider knowledge of the Trust's systems, culture, and SEND practices enabled deeper insight into participants' references, assumptions, and contextual nuances, strengthening the richness of interpretation; however, it also required heightened caution to avoid over-familiarity, premature assumptions, or the projection of my own experiences onto the data. To mitigate these risks, I maintained reflexivity through the use of a reflective journal and regular peer-debriefing, which supported critical interrogation of how my positionality may have influenced both data collection and interpretation.

Participants

This research focused on a specific cohort of professionals: SENDCos. Therefore, a purposeful sampling approach was employed to meet the study aims. As an employee at a school within a Trust, I had the opportunity to establish contact with multiple schools and SENDCos through pre-existing professional networks. To focus specifically on the perspectives of primary school SENDCos, participants from high schools were deliberately excluded from the selection process. Six participants from two local authority areas agreed to take part in the study, representing a spectrum of teaching experience that ranged from newly qualified SENDCos to experienced SENDCos. I extended my sampling to include senior leaders to gain broader perspectives on the issues researched. Subsequently, one

headteacher and one SEND leader from the Trust agreed to take part in the study. All eight participants were drawn from the same Multi-Academy Trust; while this facilitated access and ensured familiarity with comparable organisational structures, it also represents a limitation because participants' experiences were shaped by a shared institutional culture. Consequently, the transferability of findings to SENDCos working in other Trusts or local authority contexts may be constrained.

Interviews and Data Analysis

Individual participants were interviewed via semi-structured interviews that lasted 30 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews took place face-to-face at the participants' place of work and were audio recorded. It is important to recognise the potential limitations associated with conducting qualitative interviews. The nature of interviews, particularly as an insider researcher, may hinder participants from openly disclosing their personal beliefs or opinions (Braun and Clark, 2013), thus potentially distorting the representation of the contemporary SENDCo role. To analyse the data, this study utilised an inductive approach to thematic analysis to better understand the complexities and context-specific variations in perspectives (Jason and Glenwick, 2016). The study adhered to the step-by-step guide to thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clark (2006). Coding was conducted manually using a codebook developed from close, line-by-line reading of the verbatim transcripts. Microsoft Excel was used to organise excerpts, codes and memos and to track code refinements across iterations. To enhance credibility, a peer researcher (with experience in SEND leadership but not involved in data collection) independently coded a purposive subset of two transcripts (~25% of the corpus). We then held consensus meetings to compare interpretations, discuss discrepancies, and refine code definitions; agreement was reached through discussion rather than calculation of a reliability coefficient, consistent with reflexive thematic analysis. An audit trail (versioned codebook, dated memos, and decision log) documented all analytic decisions. This process of analysis was non-linear, involving continuous movement back and forth between the various phases as necessary. I produced verbatim transcriptions of all my interviews to ensure I captured the data precisely. As highlighted by Halcomb and Davidson (2006), verbatim transcription is indispensable for ensuring the accuracy, validity, and reliability of data collection.. The subsequent phase involved the generation of initial codes in the dataset and the correlation of the data with the created codes. Initial coding combined

semantic codes (explicit content) with latent codes (underlying meanings). Constant comparison was used within and across transcripts to collapse overlapping codes and to surface patterns. Codes were then clustered into candidate themes using iterative mind-mapping and thematic tables that specified each theme's scope, inclusion criteria, and negative cases, alongside exemplar quotations. Candidate themes were reviewed against coded extracts and the full data set to check coherence and distinctiveness, then defined and named. Final themes were agreed after a final peer debrief and were retained where they demonstrated a clear analytic narrative linking back to the research aim.

The themes were carefully reviewed and identified as: impact of leadership, inclusion, role pressure, role change and the future of the role. This paper discusses two of the themes identified. Throughout analysis, reflexivity was maintained via a bracketing journal and regular peer debriefs to surface and consider how my insider/outsider position might shape coding and theme development.

Ethical Considerations

This research strictly adheres to the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research established by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) in 2018, with ongoing ethical reflections undertaken at each stage of the study. Ethical approval for this research was obtained on 18th March 2024 from University College London (UCL).

Before embarking on the study, a comprehensive ethics application form was submitted to the UCL Institute of Education Research Committee. This application was accompanied by a comprehensive risk assessment which involved outlining potential risks of the study and methods used to mitigate these risks.

In the initial stage of ethical consideration, information sheets regarding the research process were shared with potential participants, and written consent was obtained from all willing participants. The right to withdraw was emphasised, and participants were reassured that this could be enacted at any stage without fear of bias, discrimination, or repercussions.

Data protection guidelines were rigorously adhered to, with all participants having their identities anonymised. Furthermore, no names of specific settings or locations were disclosed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity within the study. The collected data was stored securely on a password-protected computer that only I could access to ensure confidentiality.

Findings

Data analysis identified five themes, with *Inclusion* and *Role Pressure* emerging as the most substantial. These two themes are therefore explored in depth and organised into clear subthemes using participant identifiers P1–P8.

Table 1. *Summary of themes, subthemes, empirical codes, and supporting quotations*

Theme	Subtheme	Empirical codes	Illustrative quotations
Inclusion	Complex needs in mainstream	Rapid escalation of HLN; insufficient fit of mainstream; resource scarcity; parental denial	“I’ve never seen such high needs... school is at breaking point.” (P1)
Inclusion	Impact on staffing	TA recruitment crisis; physical risk; workload overload; staff burnout	“TAs phoning in sick... they don’t want to come to work to be punched or bitten.” (P3) “TAs are on the frontline... being bit, kicked... without them we couldn’t teach.” (P6)
Inclusion	Impact on children	Reduced support for non-SEND pupils; G&T overlooked; safety risks; inappropriate placement	“He was in danger of hurting himself or others.” (P3) “Forget your gifted and talented children... they’re not going to get a look in.” (P6)
Role pressure	Internal pressures	Parental expectations; decision-making burden; paperwork; lack of time	“You are the frontline for parents... you get it from all angles.” (P3) “Coping shouldn’t be the bar... you feel horrible making those decisions.” (P4)
Role pressure	External pressures	Policy overload; multi-agency fragmentation; funding constraints; competing roles	“Agencies are battling against each other... everybody is drowning.” (P1) “The problems involve money... it’s a nationwide issue.” (P1)
Role pressure	Emotional pressures	Emotional strain; guilt; sleep loss; constant worry	“I carry a lot of guilt... sleepless nights thinking about these families.” (P1) “There’s always someone I’m worried about... I don’t sleep.” (P6)
Positive aspects (cross-theme)	Joy and fulfilment	Professional reward; meaningful impact; value of small successes	“For all its negatives, it’s positive... those tiny successes mean so much.” (P2) “It’s probably the most rewarding job ever.” (P4)

Theme 1: Inclusion

Inclusion, and the challenges and opportunities associated with it, emerged as the most prominent theme. Participants discussed the rights of all children to an education, as well as the significant pressures placed on schools attempting to deliver inclusive practice. Three subthemes were identified: Complex Needs in Mainstream Settings, Impact on Staffing, and Impact on Children.

1.1 Complex Needs in Mainstream Settings

SENDCos expressed strong support for the principles of inclusion. As P2 reflected:

“We are building our future society, and every child matters going forward.”

However, despite this positive commitment, participants described a dramatic increase in the number and complexity of needs:

“We’ve got such HLN children coming into school... I have never seen such high needs. School is at breaking point... we are living on a knife edge.” (P1)

Participants reported that some children’s needs were so profound that mainstream settings could not meet them adequately:

“The number of children with HLN that should be in special schools... the system is so broken.” (P7)

Challenges included insufficient funding, limited resources, restricted specialist spaces, and cultural barriers—such as parents unwilling to acknowledge their child’s needs.

1.2 Impact on Staffing

Participants discussed substantial staffing implications, particularly around the recruitment and retention of Teaching Assistants (TAs). Senior leaders linked TA shortages to the increasing complexity of HLN children:

“Having a class TA will be a thing of the past... they’re on the frontline... without them we couldn’t teach, and we couldn’t have SEND children in school.” (P6)

SENDCos described the physical and emotional toll on TAs:

“TAs are phoning in sick... some refuse to work with HLN children... they don’t want to come to work to be punched, kicked or bitten.” (P3)

Teachers were similarly affected:

“Trying to juggle teaching, safeguarding and very high needs is actually a huge job.” (P2)

Staff wellbeing was repeatedly raised:

“It’s causing a big strain on staffing... trying to be inclusive without detrimentally impacting staff wellbeing.” (P1)

Despite the pressures, some participants identified opportunities:

“Although extremely challenging, it also upskills us... it makes us think differently.” (P2)

1.3 Impact on Children

Concerns were raised for both SEND and non-SEND children. Many participants highlighted reduced support for non-SEND pupils, particularly gifted and talented learners, because resources were diverted to pupils with EHCPs:

“Forget your gifted and talented children—they won’t get a look in... that’s tragic.” (P6)

SENDCos also raised concerns about safety and appropriateness of placement:

“At times it had to be three people because he ran into walls... he was in danger of hurting himself or others.” (P3)

Participants agreed that the rapid increase in complex needs, combined with limited support and funding, was impacting children’s experiences across the board.

Theme 2: Role Pressure

Participants described the SENDCo role as being under significant pressure, stemming from internal, external and emotional sources. These pressures shaped their capacity to fulfil the role and influenced their personal wellbeing.

2.1 Internal Pressures

SENDCos identified increasing HLN numbers, staffing shortages, insufficient time, paperwork, and limited resources as major internal pressures. Parental engagement was consistently described as the most challenging aspect of the role:

“You are the frontline for parents... you get it from all angles.” (P3)

SENDCos described navigating complex parental expectations:

“Some parents don’t get involved... we end up doing the role from both sides.” (P5)

Senior leaders recognised these difficulties:

“I see parents in crisis... with nothing changing to improve their lives.” (P6)

Decision-making responsibilities also carried significant weight:

“‘Coping’ shouldn’t be the bar we are setting... it’s absolutely awful, and you feel horrible.”
(P4)

2.2 External Pressures

External pressures centred on policy demands, multi-agency working and funding constraints.

Multi-agency processes were described as fragmented and adversarial:

“Agencies are battling against each other... everybody is drowning in the level of needs and there’s no support.” (P1)

Funding shortages were highlighted by several participants:

“The problems at the moment involve money... it’s a nationwide problem.” (P1)

SENDCos also reported juggling multiple roles beyond SEND, such as safeguarding or EAL, which intensified workload pressures:

“I feel spread so thinly... I can only give part of myself to each role.” (P4)

Senior leaders confirmed this burden:

“SENDCos are under more pressure than ever... they’re almost being social workers.” (P7)

2.3 Emotional Pressures

Emotional pressures permeated every aspect of the role. SENDCos described stress, guilt, worry and sleep loss as routine:

“I carry a lot of guilt... I go home thinking about these families. It gives me sleepless nights.” (P1)

Senior leaders echoed these concerns:

“SENDCos have work-related stress... they hate not being able to do the best for pupils.”
(P7)

Participants also described deep emotional investment:

“There is always someone I am worried about... you get so invested in the children and

the teaching team.” (P6)

Despite these challenges, all SENDCos reported significant joy and fulfilment:

“For all its negatives, it’s positive... those tiny successes mean so much.” (P2)

Table 2. *Summary of Challenges and Opportunities Identified by Participants*

Theme	Subtheme	Challenges identified	Opportunities identified
Inclusion	Complex needs in mainstream	Rapid increase in HLN pupils; mainstream settings insufficient for some needs; lack of specialist spaces; insufficient staffing and funding; parental reluctance to acknowledge SEND.	Reinforces inclusive values; contributes to building a diverse future society.
Inclusion	Impact on staffing	TA recruitment difficulties; risk of injury (biting, kicking); teacher workload overload; strain on wellbeing; time-intensive adaptations.	Upskilling of staff; increased adaptability and creative problem-solving.
Inclusion	Impact on children	Reduced support for non-SEND pupils; gifted and talented overlooked; safety concerns for some SEND pupils; inappropriate placements for HLN children.	Opportunities for social learning; increased peer understanding of diversity.
Role pressure	Internal pressures	Managing HLN with limited resources; paperwork burden; insufficient time; challenging parental interactions; responsibility for high-stakes decisions.	Opportunities to advocate for families; development of strong relationships with parents.
Role pressure	External pressures	Fragmented multi-agency coordination; insufficient funding; conflicting expectations between agencies; multiple roles beyond SEND (e.g., safeguarding, EAL).	Multi-agency expertise can enhance provision when functioning effectively.
Role pressure	Emotional pressures	Stress, guilt, worry; sleep disruption; emotional fatigue; pressure to meet conflicting demands.	Deep professional fulfilment; sense of purpose through small successes.

The findings illuminate a profession under intense pressure, navigating increasing complexity, limited resources, and heightened emotional demands. At the same time, SENDCos demonstrate deep commitment to inclusion and experience moments of considerable reward. The subsequent chapter offers a discussion of these findings in relation to their alignment with the pre-existing body of knowledge.

Discussion

Impact of Inclusion

One of the primary findings of this study concerns the challenges encountered by SENDCos and senior leaders as they endeavour to facilitate the inclusion of children with complex needs in mainstream schools. In 2021 82% of pupils with SEND were in state-funded mainstream schools according to the 2022 SEND Review (DfE, 2022). In the present study, the concept of inclusion was initially approached from a positive perspective, gaining support from both SENDCos and senior leaders who endorsed its values and principles. It was acknowledged by some participants that inclusion plays a significant role in shaping our future society. This viewpoint corresponds with the findings in other research studies (Sandoval, et al., 2021; Liasidou and Svensson, 2013; Liasidou and Antoniou, 2013; Runswick-Cole and Hodge, 2009; Erwin and Guintini, 2000), which suggest that inclusion acts as a catalyst for societal transformation towards a more diverse and enriched society.

According to the senior leaders in this study, there is a recognised need for SENDCos to enhance their skills to effectively promote inclusion. This need was viewed positively and reflects wider calls for the strengthening of SEND leadership capacity (Liasidou & Svensson, 2013; Szwed, 2007; Lee et al., 2015; Curran & Boddison, 2021). These studies similarly highlight a need to re-evaluate traditional classroom structures and pedagogies so that inclusive practice becomes embedded and sustainable.

However, the numerous challenges associated with facilitating inclusion at a practical level were reported by all participants. Findings identified numerous challenges, including insufficient government funding, support, shortages of teaching assistants and resources to manage complex needs. Similar findings were reported in the literature reviewed (Warnes et al., 2022; Cole, 2005; Haugh, 1999; Nilholm and Alm, 2009; Szwed, 2007). The challenge of ensuring inclusion when it represented just one facet of the role, with various other competing factors was noted. A prevalent issue in the literature was the constraint of time, or more precisely, its scarcity. Additionally, numerous operational factors were identified as impacting the role of the SENDCo, including administrative responsibilities and the need to follow up with external agencies (Rosen-Webb, 2011; Szwed, 2007; Tysoe et al., 2021;

Dobson and Douglas, 2018; Pulsford, 2020; Tissot, 2013; Curran, 2019, and Curran and Boddison, 2021).

These findings also reflect broader international debates on inclusive education leadership. Ainscow (2018) notes rising levels of teacher burnout globally as schools attempt to meet increasingly complex learner needs without proportional increases in structural support—mirroring the stress, overload and emotional exhaustion described by SENDCos in this study. Likewise, Maher and Vickerman (2018) highlight persistent policy–practice dissonance in inclusive education systems, where ambitious national inclusion policies are not matched by adequate funding, training or operational guidance. This gap closely aligns with participants’ accounts of insufficient resources; overloaded workloads and the practical disconnect between inclusion rhetoric and the day-to-day realities of leading SEND provision.

This research contributes to the current body of literature on inclusion. It is concerning that the challenges encountered by schools in their efforts to implement the inclusion agenda have persisted and, according to the findings of this study, have heightened over the past two years.

Impact of Inclusion on Non-SEND Children

Findings from this study also suggested that the academic performance of non-SEND children was being adversely affected due to the inclusion of SEND children in the same classrooms. This was attributed to the practical aspects of staffing and the allocation of resources to support HLN children. Participants reported that the allocation of teaching assistants to work with HLN children had a detrimental effect on non-SEND children, leading to a lack of essential support for them, as there were not enough Teaching Assistants to cover all children. Specific concerns were raised regarding the neglect of gifted and talented children in terms of the support they received. This issue was also highlighted in a study by Ruijs and Peetsma (2009) who found that inclusive classroom practices benefited lower-achieving students but may have negative consequences for higher-achieving students. However, the specific negative consequences were not detailed. Their review has limitations due to the diverse approaches to inclusive education, variations in groups, curricula, and support structures, making it challenging to generalise or compare findings.

By contrast, Kart and Kart’s (2021) literature review found a predominantly positive or

neutral impact of inclusion on the academic performance of non-SEND children across forty-seven studies. The variation in findings may be attributed to the literature reviewed in their study, which spans from 2000 to 2021. Participants in this current study indicated that the past two years have been particularly challenging, with a substantial increase of children with complex needs entering mainstream education during the period 2022 – 24. The literature review failed to provide contextual details regarding the research settings, making it challenging to compare with my own study. Presently, across the Trust I work in, 18.92% of children are receiving SEND support, contrasting with the national average of 13.6% in 2024, indicating an above-average requirement for SEND assistance.

This research contributes to the literature concerning the impact of inclusion on non-SEND children. The findings from this study suggest a detrimental effect of inclusion on non-SEND children, which is associated with the reduced level of support they receive when staff and resources are allocated to HLN children. This finding, however, may well be impacted by the higher-than-national-average number of HLN children within the schools covered in the study.

Impact of Parental Engagement

Participants in this study reported encountering differing pressures in relation to parental engagement. SENDCos found some parents to be either too ‘pushy’ and demanding or too uninvolved. SENDCos expressed that they were the frontline for parents and reported feeling pressure to advocate for them when parents either did not or could not advocate for themselves. Curran’s (2019) study also identified that SENDCos experienced pressure to advocate for parents. However, the study by Warner, et al., (2022) found that only three respondents (3%) identified parents as presenting a challenge. Among them, two perceived that parents held unrealistic expectations, while the third observed that parents appeared to be unsupported and isolated. In Szwed's (2007) study, supportive parents were ranked fifth out of five in terms of significance to aiding the role, indicating that the challenges associated with parents were not significant in these two studies. However, there was a lack of detailed information regarding the contextual and demographic characteristics of the schools in the above studies. For instance, Warner, et al.’s, (2022, p.33) study, which involved an online

survey distributed among "geographically dispersed populations", did not offer additional contextual details about their populations which limit its comparability with this study. Schools in my study are predominantly situated in areas characterised by high levels of deprivation and a significant proportion of families with English as an Additional Language (EAL). In socially deprived areas, schools often have a high number of students with SEND and limited resources to manage the need (Warner et al., 2022). SENDCos in this study reported that some parents faced difficulties in accessing the necessary support systems due to limited understanding or low literacy levels. This difficulty may be attributed in part to the schools' context and demographics.

The findings from this study both align with and diverge from existing literature on parental engagement. While the reviewed literature was not directly linked to the impact of parental engagement, this study's findings suggest that challenges associated with parents can impact on the role of the SENDCo.

Emotional Pressure

SENDCos and senior leaders felt emotional pressure in relation to their roles. All participants reported feelings of guilt, stress, and worry. Many participants reported that they lose sleep due to feelings of worry and anxiety for children and families. Senior leaders were worried and felt guilty about the level of support they could – or could not - offer SENDCos, while SENDCos felt guilty that they were not doing enough for the children and their families they supported.

The majority of the literature reviewed in this study focused on the operational enactments of the SENDCo role, with far less attention given to the emotional experiences associated with it. Although Cole (2005) and Rosen-Webb (2011) acknowledged stress and its management as central aspects of the role, only Curran (2021) began to examine the broader emotional impacts beyond stress alone. Curran (2021) also highlights that SENDCos engage in a distinct form of 'emotional labour', a demand that can significantly influence their resilience and overall wellbeing. This strong emotional dimension aligns with Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labour, which describes the requirement for professionals to regulate their feelings in order to present calmness, empathy and reassurance—expectations

that closely mirror SENDCos' daily interactions with distressed families, anxious teachers and children with complex needs. Such demands help to explain the intensity of guilt, stress and emotional fatigue reported by participants. At the same time, the organisational pressures described by SENDCos resonate with distributed leadership theory (Spillane, 2006), which views leadership as stretched across multiple people, tools and situations. SENDCos in this study were positioned at the intersection of teaching staff, senior leadership, parents and external agencies, meaning that emotional and organisational responsibilities were dispersed but not always equitably shared. This helps illuminate why participants experienced their role as both emotionally burdensome and structurally fragmented

A further emotional impact that emerged in the current study was that despite the many pressures all participants reported they also found considerable joy in the role. One SENDCo commented, 'it's probably the most rewarding job ever', supporting findings from Curran and Boddison (2021) and Cole (2005), who found that many SENDCos experience significant fulfilment despite the emotional load.

These findings resonate with international evidence showing that leaders of inclusion frequently face rising levels of emotional strain, role intensification and operational overload, mirroring global concerns around teacher burnout (Ainscow, 2018) and workforce sustainability within inclusive systems. Additionally, the persistent gap between policy ambitions and practical implementation identified in this study aligns with wider international critiques of policy–practice dissonance in inclusive education (Maher & Vickerman, 2018), suggesting that the English context reflects global systemic tensions rather than isolated local issues.

Limitations

As a teacher and insider researcher, I brought considerable insight into the knowledge of practice I was exploring, and I was able to draw upon my lived experience in education to guide my research questions and focus. I was aware, however, that being a teacher and insider researcher in the same Trust as the study participants also required me to be extra vigilant in relation to how I conducted my research. I sought to ensure that I was not too close to the

data that I made assumptions about answers and not to probe and seek clarification enough in my interviews (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). I sought to clearly separate my role as a teacher from my role as a researcher - ensuring anonymity and confidentiality for participants. Whilst overtly seeking to own my positionality in relation to data collection and analysis, my own role in the Trust may have influenced the responses some of the participants felt they wanted to share with me. One of the senior leaders interviewed was my line manager, for example, and our work relationship may have impacted the responses she gave to me.

While this research did not claim to be generalisable to the larger population, it is important to consider the sample of the participants. All the participants worked within the same Trust, in similar school contexts, with three of them working in the same school. Additionally, all participants were white British females with no male SENDCos currently working within the trust. To enhance validity, future research could involve a larger and more diverse sample size. It is also worth noting that both senior leaders interviewed had extensive knowledge and experience as SENDCos. Future research could explore the impact that leaders without such experience and knowledge have on the leadership of SEND.

Implications of Findings

Findings from this study suggest the current situation surrounding SEND is problematic, with all participants conveying their concerns in different ways. One SENDCo commented that '*SEND is in crisis, which means education is in crisis*'.

This research suggests that the role of the SENDCo remains a demanding position within schools, with participants in the study highlighting the past two years as being exceptionally challenging. This challenge is attributed to the growing number of children with complex needs entering mainstream schools amid a backdrop of diminishing funding, resources, and staff. Recent data on SEND affirms this observation, noting a rise of 101,000 children registered as having SEND since 2023. Furthermore, the prevalence of pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) has increased from 4.3 in 2023 to 4.8 presently (DfE, 2024). The study participants recommend increasing funding and enhancing support from external agencies to support SEND and study findings strongly suggest that provision

to support HLN teaching in mainstream settings needs improvement. These pressures highlight an urgent need for clearer national policy direction on the future of SEND leadership, including strengthening professional pathways such as the NPQ for SEND Leadership. If implemented effectively, the NPQ could provide a more consistent training framework, equipping SENDCos with leadership, strategic planning and workload-management skills that directly address the challenges identified in this study.

The findings of this study also indicate that schools are encountering challenges in securing Teaching Assistants to support children with complex needs. Moreover, teachers are struggling to provide the necessary support for these children. Failure to address these issues may lead to significant difficulties for schools, as expressed by senior leaders. Curran and Boddison (2021) have advocated for an evaluation of traditional classroom structures and teaching methods to ensure equal learning opportunities for all students. However, it is evident from this study that schools are attempting to address these challenges with limited support, inadequate resources, and insufficient funding. This has led to situations where schools, as reported by SENDCos, are improvising sensory resources using limited facilities such as cupboards. These findings reinforce the need for systemic supports that move beyond individual school responses. Nationally mandated workload protections, funded staffing ratios, and access to specialist provision would help ensure that inclusion does not rely on improvised resourcing or unsustainable staff effort.

Kart and Kart (2021) suggest that the inclusion of HLN children within mainstream settings has a positive or neutral effect on the academic performance of non-SEND children. However, the findings of this study imply that certain children, particularly the gifted and talented, are potentially disadvantaged due to the unavailable resources and staff being allocated to support HLN. Moving forward, it is important for policy and practice to address this issue as it is not aligned with equality of opportunity and may have implications for the educational attainment of all children. This suggests that inclusion policy must also consider equity for all pupils, ensuring that staffing and resource allocation frameworks prevent unintended negative impacts on high-attaining children.

Over the past decade, there has been an ongoing issue with time allocation for fulfilling the SENDCo role, as repeatedly highlighted in research. The participants in this study have suggested that the role should not involve teaching responsibilities due to the complexity of

the remit. Similarly, Curran and Boddison (2021) have urged headteachers to allocate dedicated time for SENDCos. It may be beneficial for policymakers to consider implementing Smith and Broomhead's (2019) recommendation of establishing a more specific time allocation framework agreed upon at the local or national level for this role. In addition, implementing Curran and Boddison's (2021) proposal for the formation of a SEND team may alleviate these challenges. Embedding these structural supports at policy level—rather than leaving them to individual schools—would help professionalise the role and reduce the unsustainable workload pressures reported by participants.

The recent SEND and AP Improvement Plan has drawn attention to the concerns surrounding the role of the SENDCo. The plan specifically addresses the allocation of time and a reduction in workload to support SENDCos however, none of the subsequent proposals are concerned with these issues (Dobson, 2023). According to Dobson (2023), there is evidence of a range of other issues related to empowering or supporting the SENDCo that have been strategically disregarded. To address this gap, future policy reform should prioritise institutionalised supports such as funded release time, structured emotional-wellbeing programmes, protected professional supervision, and multi-agency collaboration frameworks. Without such systemic reforms, the pressures described in this study will continue to undermine both SENDCos' wellbeing and the quality of provision for children with SEND.

Concluding Comments and Future Research

This study delved into the experiences of six modern-day SENDCos and two senior leaders of SEND as they fulfilled their roles. The findings indicate ongoing challenges in carrying out these responsibilities, especially as the emphasis on inclusion becomes increasingly prominent, resulting in a multifaceted and demanding environment for SENDCos.

Future research should continue to monitor the implementation of the current SEND and AP reforms, particularly as the system undergoes another phase of national change. The emotional pressures experienced by SENDCos remain significantly under-researched, despite this study indicating that the role has become increasingly complex and emotionally

demanding. Further work is needed to examine how these pressures influence professional wellbeing, retention and leadership sustainability in the sector.

The implications of the new NPQ for SEND Leadership also warrant systematic investigation. Research should explore whether this qualification strengthens leadership capacity, improves strategic decision-making, and contributes to more consistent role expectations across schools. Additionally, the emotional labour associated with the SENDCo role, and the impact of increasing numbers of HLN pupils on Teaching Assistants deserves closer scrutiny, given the substantial workforce challenges highlighted in this study.

Beyond the national context, future research should also prioritise cross-national comparative studies that examine how inclusive leadership in early childhood and primary settings is conceptualised, supported and enacted internationally. Comparative work could investigate how the English SENDCo role aligns with equivalent leadership roles in systems such as Ireland (SEN Coordinators), Scotland (ASN Coordinators) and OECD early childhood inclusion frameworks. Key priorities include comparing leadership preparation and training requirements, analysing how different policy structures shape leaders' emotional labour and workload, and identifying the system-level supports—such as staffing ratios, multi-agency coordination models and early intervention pathways—that enable or hinder effective inclusion leadership. Such cross-national insights would help clarify whether the challenges identified in this study are uniquely English or reflective of broader global patterns in inclusive education leadership.

Finally, a critical area for future inquiry lies in evaluating the effectiveness of the new SEND Improvement Plan, particularly whether its proposals lead to meaningful change or simply perpetuate the long-standing pattern in SEND reform whereby 'everything changes but nothing changes'. Understanding the real-world impact of the plan will be key to determining whether policy rhetoric translates into practical improvements for schools, SENDCos and children.

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