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# Who would do that role? Understanding why teachers become SENCOs through an ecological systems theory

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## **Abstract**

In England, schools are required to have a named and trained ‘Special Educational Needs Coordinator’ or SENCo. The difficulties of operationalizing the role of the SENCo are well documented, as is the inconsistent allocation of status and time for the role. Drawing on the results of data derived from 88 SENCos, we examine the explanations teachers provide for training to become a SENCo, given the conspicuous difficulties in fulfilling the role, occasioned not least by lack of role clarity. We use a simple cross-sectional survey to gather a range of responses from different teachers when asked about the nature of their role and their reasons for taking it up. Using a thematic analysis which employs ecological systems theory, the teacher explanations are organised into four co-existing themes: 1) directly experienced individually-based explanations; 2) indirectly experienced individually-based explanations; 3) school-based explanations; and 4) policy-influenced explanations. Ecological systems theory enables an analysis which points to the intersecting motives that teachers express in being attracted to the role of SENCo. Teachers bring a range of personal experiences and a desire to change school practice; however, this is often set inside uncertainties about the appropriateness of existing national policy and how to navigate it. Confusion and dissonance emerging from conflicting drivers about the nature of the role are thus mediated and moderated by teachers’ deep personal commitment to teaching.

## **Key Words**

SEN/Disability, Leadership/Management, Inclusion/Exclusion, Governance/management/administration, SENCo, ecological systems theory

## **Introduction**

A report delivered by the UK National Audit Office in 2018 (National Audit Office, 2018) highlighted the current challenges of teacher retention, recruiting teachers of the right quality and regional variations of practice – particularly in the Midlands of England. As part of their response, the Department for Education (Department for Education [DfE], 2018) has recently commissioned work to develop the special educational needs school workforce in England. One strand of this work is to support headteachers to appoint Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCos) and support their initial development. This training is additional to the National Standard SENCo (NASENCo) training which also has a lengthy list of learning outcomes (National College for Teaching and Leadership [NCTL], 2014).

This present study can inform this work by unpicking the reasons why aspirant and new SENCOs are attracted to this appointment in the first instance. Research to date has not addressed this issue sufficiently. Rather, there has been a desire to respond to those who are already in the role through understanding their individual experiences (see Glazzard, 2014, Mackenzie, 2012), their difficulties with operationalising the role in school (Szwed, 2007), or the difficulties of negotiating policy frameworks (Robertson, 2012). These concerns have also been raised in international contexts in locales where the SENCO or equivalent role has become a key to the delivery of inclusive education, such as Sweden (Klang, Gustafson, Mollas, Nilholm, & Goransson, 2017), Hong Kong (Poon-McBrayer, 2012) and Ireland (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017).

The present study reports on findings from research conducted with a group of teachers and school leaders who are currently undertaking the NASENCO Programme at an English University. It provides a focus on the reasons why they entered this role in the first instance. We outline key existing work and how this relates both to individuals and policy. We provide an overview of how the research was conducted and then draw upon the research for selected recommendations and findings. The findings emphasise the wide range of reasons why teachers find themselves in the role of SENCO and what they wish to achieve in this role. We use the ecological systems theory offered by Bronfenbrenner (2005) as a lens through which we can provide an analysis within the different systems of influence that draw teachers into this position, thus offering those appointing SENCOs a better understanding of what this group of professionals already bring to the role.

## **Rationale**

### ***The SENCO – Existing practice brought together under a title forged in government policy***

It is important to recognise that when teachers are attracted to the role of SENCO, they are attracted to a role which has developed through policy over several decades. Indeed, the role was first explicitly constructed in policy terms within two short paragraphs of what a SENCO ‘should’ do in the first Code of Practice (DfE, 1994, 2:14), an advisory document to add operational clarity to The Education Act 1993. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the role of the SENCO was first presented in the Warnock report (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1978) and the Education Act 1981, which heralded the right for children with

special educational needs to be educated alongside their peers in ‘ordinary’ schools. The 1981 Act required headteachers to manage the complex processes of identification and support associated with special education needs provision. The headteacher could delegate these duties to others within the school whilst maintaining overall control.

The role described in the 1994 Code of Practice evolved from the duties issued to the headteacher in the original 1981 Education Act and the pre-existing ‘specialist teacher’ (Crowther, Dyson & Millward, 2001, p.86). Over time the role has evolved and been developed as a reaction to policy and change in statutory requirements (e.g., Pearson, Mitchell & Rapti, 2015). The role of SENCo is now more than *guidance*; the Education (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators) (England) Regulations 2008 made it a specific statutory duty for mainstream schools to employ a SENCo and clarified the qualifications and training required. This includes the legal requirement that the SENCo is a qualified teacher who has completed their induction, and that they complete the National Standards SENCo (NASENCo) award within three years of their first appointment as SENCo. However, as more recently highlighted in The Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations (2014, p23.) this is where consistency ends, and local interpretation returns through the decision making powers of ‘The Appropriate Authority’. ‘The Appropriate Authority’ is also often known as the governing body or academy proprietor, most of whom discharge their duties through a headteacher or equivalent. This ‘Appropriate Authority’ (50:1) is charged with defining what the SENCo ‘must’ do; however, immediately following this there is a list of SENCo functions which ‘may’ be – but not always – chosen from. (50:3), hence the wide variation in practice in how SENCos operate in different schools.

### ***The SENCo – a history of consistent inconsistency at the school level***

The provisions of the Education Reform Act 1988 are ultimately responsible for this variation in practice. This legislation sits chronologically between the original Education Act 1981, which introduced many components familiar in the present systems of special education, and the first Code of Practice, which introduced the role of the SENCo (Department for Education [DFE], 1994). Within the Education Reform Act 1988, schools were provided with significant local autonomy and budgetary control for the ‘Appropriate Authority’ to exercise at their discretion (Levacic, 1998). Within all legislation relating to special educational needs since 1994, this ‘appropriate authority’ and the headteacher have been required to determine the role of the SENCo – hence the wide variety in national practice. Additionally, each

successive iteration of the Code of Practice (DFE, 1994, Department for Education and Skills [DfES, 2001], DfE and Department of Health [DOH], 2015) has added to this potential interpretation at a school level by changing the provided list of *suggested* duties for the SENCo. The current list includes 11 duties, having evolved from the original six. Again, the present list of duties is preceded by ‘may include’ (DfE and DOH, 2015, p.108) adding legal uncertainty about what a SENCo is expected to do. It is perhaps unsurprising that this has led to concerns about inconsistency of school-based practice, including: varying time allocated to execute the role (Szwed, 2007; Qureshi, 2015), administrative overload (Cole, 2005) and perhaps most importantly their leadership status and their position to effect change (Oldham & Radford, 2011). Indeed, those who enter this role are unlikely to have seen any consistency across different settings. In turn, this may impact upon their own interpretation about what they may or should do, unless they are acutely familiar with the openness to interpretation in both statute law and regulation.

### ***The SENCo – ‘It’s a people thing’.***

Therefore, the construction of the role is not just a product of top-down imposition of legislation, but it is also constructed through local school-based interpretation. However, an additional and important factor within this local interpretation is through the SENCos themselves – i.e. individuals who fulfil roles all perform “different kind[s] of action” (Burr, 2015, p.5). Rosen-Webb (2011) through interview-based research argued that SENCos drew from their own identity values to operationalise their role. Kearns (2005) provides a typology of approaches that individual SENCos adopt in their everyday practice including: arbitrator, who wishes to help both teachers and parents; auditor, who assures compliance with legal procedure; collaborator, who wishes to work with others to share practice; and rescuer, who avoids working strategically across an institution to work with individual teachers. Perhaps this variation is unsurprising given SENCos have a range of different values as well as a multiplicity of experiences prior to entering the role (Rosen-Webb, 2011; Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington, & Gu, 2007). Mackenzie (2012, p.1080) argues that many SENCos bring a deep sense of emotional commitment to the role, and they may regard it as a role in which they can demonstrate their passion and caring and alter their own internal state by expressing their own emotional experiences through their work.

### *Understanding SENCo career interest through the lens of the Ecological Systems model*

I have argued so far that the SENCo is not a homogenous breed. SENCos draw from a wide range of resources including experience, school practice and overarching policy in constructing their roles.

The process of this construction can be helped using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which offers structure to the set of potential influences on the role. Often exemplified within an arrangement of nested circles, Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005) proposed that human development throughout the lifecourse is the result of a framework of proximal and distal systems surrounding the person. Each of these interact with the individual and with each other. Most proximal to the person is the *microsystem* which acknowledges the "activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting", (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). For the SENCo, these may equate to their interactions in home settings with family and friends and working directly with colleagues in their work settings. This is surrounded by the *mesosystem* which "comprises the interrelations among two or more setting in which the developing person actively participates", (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.25) or "microsystems combined" (Thomas, 2011, p.57). These systems are encircled by the *exosystem* where the individual does not actively participate but is influenced by actions which may "affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the [...] person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.25). For the SENCo, this could equate to school decision making processes, practice in other classrooms and school policy over which they have no influence but could impact upon the organisation and its effectiveness which in turn would affect the SENCo and their role. The most distal processes are within the *macrosystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 p.26) which relates to consistencies due to culture, ideology or wider factors. For the SENCo, this would include impact of governmental ideology and the values of wider society. The *chronosystem* was added by Bronfenbrenner (2005, p.82) later to acknowledge the impact of events situated in time on development. For example, a teacher with an interest in special educational needs in 1990 may have transitioned into a SENCo in 1994; however, if policy had been constructed differently the role of the SENCo may never have existed at all.

### ***The current study***

While existing literature stresses the different influences upon how individual SENCOs might operationalise their job, research into the process through which teachers enter the role (and the required training) is limited. Where there is research evidence, the analysis often relates to internalised individual factors such as emotional labour (Mackenzie, 2012, p.1080) rather than looking at the development of interest in the role in the broader context. More recently, the ecological systems theory offered by Bronfenbrenner (2005) has been used in the research of specialist teachers. This research has addressed individual factors alongside broader, contextual factors in the training of specialist teachers (McLinden, Ravenscroft, Douglas, Cobb, & Hewett, 2017a). The lens has also been used in an analysis of how the role of specialist teachers is envisaged by policy makers (McLinden, Douglas, Hewett, Cobb, & Lynch, 2017b). These studies provide a much more holistic overview of the behaviours of individuals within the multiple contexts in which they operate. Bronfenbrenner (2005, p. 78) argues that the minimum requirement for a process-person-context model is information derived from three separate domains:

- the context (which for the SENCO may be the school or overarching education system);
- the personal characteristics (which may be the psychological features of the person and their experiences of life and work); and
- the process through which the change in career interest happened.

However, these should not be separated. Rather, there is a need to see how they work together. Consequently, applying Bronfenbrenner's (2005) framework to the process of becoming a SENCO "is subject to the *interactive moderating effects* of both person and context" (p.78). Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to explore how trainee SENCOs understand and report the development of their interest in the role. Specifically, the study aims to address the following questions:

- What are the factors or reasons reported by teachers on how they developed interest in the role of SENCO?
- How can we understand these reasons within the realms of the people and the contexts in which these decisions were made?



## **Methodology**

### ***Research design***

The present study aims to make sense of the reasons people present for choosing to become a SENCo and it does this through a simple cross-sectional study. The first author leads a NASENCo programme at an English University. The second author is less involved in the programme and particularly advised on the methodology and the process of analysis.

### ***Questionnaires***

As part of an exploratory study, data were gathered utilising a questionnaire where participants were asked to respond to a request to ‘work on their own to list at least three reasons why they became a SENCo’. This question was designed to provide an opportunity for participants to write openly and with breadth about their thoughts. Additional demographic data and school-based data were asked for in a number of closed and short response questions. These were designed using the same categories present in national data sets such as the school workforce data release (DfE, 2017) and explored a wide variety of variables including gender, age and leadership status in schools and settings. Although simple in nature, this approach did allow for a wider range of data to be gathered rather than the narrow (but more in-depth) datasets gathered in interviews in preceding studies such as Rosen-Webb’s (2011).

### ***Participants and ethics***

The questionnaires were completed by 88 SENCos in training as an activity on one of the course days. The sample was opportunistic, recruited from students at the start of the NASENCo Award at the institution where the first author is the programme lead. All participants were qualified teachers and early career or aspirant SENCos. It is a legal requirement that the SENCo is a qualified teacher, employed in a school and has completed their induction. Consequently, all participants have met these three requirements so were not regarded as being either vulnerable or lacking in the capacity to provide consent. It was not the aim to generalise the findings to the population of all SENCos in training so there is little risk of the distortion of findings which may occur because of this limitation with sampling (Thomas 2017, p.141). Nevertheless, the sample broadly reflected the characteristics of the workforce within English state schools (DfE, 2017) (with national data parenthesised): 100%

(94.7%) holding Qualified Teacher Status or equivalent; 91% (73.9%) identifying as female; 89.7% (86.5%) identifying as White British; all the 27.7 % (23.2%) of participants who worked part time were female.

The study adhered to ethical guidelines published by the British Psychological Society (2009) and the British Educational Research Association (2011) and was granted full ethical approval by relevant University authorities. On the day of the study a consent letter was distributed emphasising that the study was being conducted by a postgraduate student, not the first author, to minimise risk of individuals feeling an obligation to participate. The letter was issued with a participant information sheet explaining that the individual had been selected as an aspirant or early career SENCo and additional information including informed consent and a right to withdraw. Data were collected from three separate cohorts giving the total sample. Each questionnaire was given a unique reference which provided an opportunity for later participant withdrawal and rigorous / transparent reporting (quotations used in reporting are attributed the relevant reference). This consisted of a 2-digit code to identify the cohort (BC, BS, BP), followed by a further 2 digit code unique to the participant. These individual codes were recorded on the questionnaires and are known to participants. However, neither authors have any knowledge about which code relates to which participant.

### ***Thematic Analysis***

The results were transcribed by the first author prior to analysis using thematic analysis (as defined by Braun and Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2013) share two major approaches to thematic analysis a 'Big Q and Small Q' approach. The 'Big Q' used in this study adopted no fixed or pre-set codes, rather, codes were identified through a close examination of the data in a generative 'bottom up' approach. Further theoretical analysis was conducted post hoc using the *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem* and *macrosystem* of the ecological systems models (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Anderson, Boyle and Deppeler, 2014) to provide structure to the analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2006) advocate a six-stage approach to thematic analysis. (1) To engage with the data set, the first author transcribed all the handwritten questionnaires into Microsoft Word to facilitate further analysis. (2) The first author highlighted sections of the data and coded these appropriately in a parallel column. (3) The codes (n = 681) and associated data were transferred into an Excel document where themes were identified and clustered. (4)

Themes were reviewed and further clustered, and (5) before being defined using the ecological system offered by Bronfenbrenner (2005). An additional stage was added by the first author following stage (5). The raw data associated with the codes identified at stage (3) were cross referenced against the themes identified in stages (4) and (5). This was to ensure that the raw data applied fully to the later stages of analysis and the resultant themes. This was before (6) the report was written. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.96) provide a 15-point checklist for good thematic analysis. This was rigorously applied to the data set and the study itself.

The overarching themes are analysed and discussed within the next section through the lenses of the *microsystem* (direct experiences), *mesosystem* (links between microsystems) *exosystem* (outside factors which directly influence the school and the person) and *macrosystem* (influence of culture) of the ecological systems models (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Anderson et al., 2014):

1. Microsystem: ‘What I have seen and what I want to be’
2. Mesosystem: ‘What I know has happened – but haven’t seen’
3. Exosystem: ‘Me and my school being influenced by factors outside of our control’
4. Macrosystem: ‘The developing culture of English educational system’

## **Findings**

The participants in the study described a wide range of reasons of how they had developed an interest in becoming a SENCo. For some this related to proximal personal experiences and needs whilst for others a desire to enact or react to distal policy statements appeared to be a primary driver.

### **(1) *Microsystem: ‘Direct experiences’***

Bronfenbrenner (2005) defines the microsystem as “a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material features and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality and systems of belief” (p.148). Here the SENCo is at the centre of the system but with immediate settings or experiences which surround them (Anderson et al., 2014, p.28). Here, direct proximal experiences play a large part in the process of making career decisions. As illustrated in Figure 1, this may be in the form of professional

experiences of working with children with SEN through to individual aspirations to develop areas such as their classroom practice or knowledge and skills.

Figure 1: Themes identified by SENCOs (microsystem)

[Figure 1 here]

### *Professional Experience*

Many participants suggested that the decision had been influenced by their professional experiences of working alongside children with SEN (n = 33) (Mackenzie, 2012). For some this had been part of their professional development or ‘apprenticeship’ prior to embarking on their teaching career exemplified by one participant who stated, ‘my first job at the school was to work with SEN children as a TA, and this seemed like a natural progression’ (BP1c). Other participants spoke of the enjoyment that experiences of working with children with SEN had brought to their role including those who ‘enjoy working with pupils with SEN’ (BS2c), often because they would ‘enjoy the rewards of seeing them achieve (even the smallest steps)’ (BP6c). For others, the influence had come directly from colleagues (n = 29). These influences may include ‘Inspiration from [the] past SENCO’ (BC6a) or a form of apprenticeship where a participant may have ‘previously worked alongside leading SENCOs on a project’ (BS3c). However, mostly the level of influence resulted from being sought to fulfil the SENCO role due to being ‘recognised by others as being ‘good’ with SEN teaching so encouraged by leadership into the role’ (BS3c) or ‘good at completing paperwork’ (BS4c). For some, the driver was a reaction against being proximal to teachers who were regarded as not being inclusive (n = 8). These included the negative experiences of being ‘frustrated by teachers ignoring the needs of SEN’ (BC6e). Indeed, for one participant, the negative responses of colleagues who believed that ‘they’re SEN, they won’t make progress’. (BP1a) was contrary to their view that the same learners ‘had a lot of potential’ (BP1a).

### *Individual aspiration*

The second theme identified within the microsystem was individual aspiration. Participants wanted to develop their own knowledge and skills (n = 42) as it was perceived that the ‘role would open up opportunities for ... professional development’ (BC4c). Learning about SEN was important due to a desire to continue ‘learning about different needs of children. This might be cognitive, physical or medical’ (BC4e). Others saw the opportunity as arising from

being able to ‘learn new skills in other areas such as ‘to advance ... leadership [skills, and] learn new skills in coaching (BC3a)’. Participants also aspired to become more inclusive teachers (n = 12). This was often to ‘learn about teaching and learning strategies for a range of needs’ (BC3a) through a reflective process of being ‘increasingly worried/ frustrated about SEN expertise, on a personal level’ (BS1c). Participants identified that this learning had to be structured and formal CPD (n = 20). This CPD included opportunities to explore their ‘keen interest in the literature surrounding SEN’ (BC7e) which was often ‘to learn more about specific needs’ (BP6g). Indeed, this CPD would be further enhanced with an opportunity to ‘gain a qualification’ (BP6a).

**(2) *Mesosystem: ‘What I know has happened – but haven’t seen’***

The mesosystem, Bronfenbrenner (2005) outlines as ‘the linkages and processes taking place between two or more setting containing the developing person... or a system of microsystems’ (p.148). As illustrated in Figure 2, this includes participants who may be parents of children with SEN. In this case, they will be part of the microsystem of the home whilst linked to the microsystem of the child’s school in this capacity of parent or carer. It may also include a setting where a participant is a teacher within the microsystem of individual classroom whilst linked to the microsystem of the school where they may become aware of the practice of others. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 209-10) suggests four potential types of linkage including multisetting participation where the person operates in two or more settings, indirect linkage where the link may be through a third person, intersetting communications where messages are transferred between one setting and another and finally intersetting knowledge where information may be known in one setting about the other through a variety of means.

Figure 2: Themes identified by SENCOs (mesosystem)

[Figure 2 here]

*Multisetting participation*

Respondents often described multisetting participation in different microsystems and settings. These microsystems include being a teacher in a school, being part of a family, the parent of a child in a school or being part of a friendship group. The participant would be part of two or more of these settings. This involvement may include proximity to the school based

experiences of close friends or family where the person participates in the both the settings of a school and the home (n = 19). They may also include being close to someone who needed more support in school (n = 13). For example, one participant described their knowledge of their child contrasted to their experience of working with their child's school as a parent. This is exemplified by their description of 'a child with his [SEN] who was really badly treated by a school who did not understand her needs and did not provide for her needs' (BS1c). A sense of cathartic justice was explained by those who considered that they could make it better for others by advocating for them. This demonstrates a linkage between themselves as a teacher in one setting and a parent in another, e.g. 'Through personal experience I have had to fight for support – some parents can't do this' (BP2d). Nevertheless, these negative experiences of settings were not universal and there was direct experience of the SENCo being able to affect positive change. Again this multisetting participation was exemplified by one respondent who explained that in primary school 'My son was regularly told off by his school for doing things which he could not help. I battled throughout, and he eventually ended up school refusing' (BS4d). However, on transition to a secondary setting the leadership of the SENCo and the direct impact of this on her child ensured that 'When he moved on to secondary school the SENCo made a huge difference. The school responded appropriately to his needs and I felt supported and my opinions were valued. As a consequence of this he is now blossoming at school' (BS4d).

### *Intersetting participation*

Respondents also worked in different microsystems within one setting – this includes being part of the microsystem of the school whilst being involved in the microsystem of a class. This intersetting communication between teachers reflecting on their own classroom microsystem and knowledge of occurrences in other classroom microsystems exemplified the theme of intersetting participation. Here, the teacher is aware of the practice in the setting of their classroom and another setting, the wider practice within their own or other schools. Participants described the perceived differential in their own and wider practice by identifying their proximity to a wider school setting where children needed improved provision (n = 17) or a setting which is seen as unable to support children with SEN (n = 17). For example, one participant explained that 'whilst there is a lot of good things in place it needs a shake up' (BC4a). Others meanwhile described inadequate provision elsewhere in

their school where SEN was largely ‘mismanaged and misrepresented’ (BS4c). Indeed, the comparison of practice in their own setting of the classroom and the work of others is exemplified by one participant who explains that ‘It infuriates me that in my current school the SENCo role has not been done well previously and that the needs of the students have not been met’ (BS1c).

**(2) *Exosystem: ‘Me and my school being influenced by factors outside of our control’***

Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines the exosystem as “one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as a participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person” (p.25). Thus, the person is indirectly influenced by the external influences. As illustrated in Figure 3, the dyad of the microsystem of the participant within their school setting is influenced by external drivers such as pay and conditions and school funding. These are distal to the person but will impact upon their everyday professional lives. Here three themes are identified, the teacher as an agent of change, pay conditions and funding, and the influence of statute.

Figure 3: Themes identified by SENCos (exosystem)

[Figure 3 here]

*The teacher as an agent of change*

Many participants identified themselves as agents of change within a school led system, a key national policy which argued that schools and teachers were able to drive their own improvement rather than this being driven externally (DfE, 2010). Firstly, participants described a vision of what effective practice should look like (n = 9). Individual visions included evidence based practice such as drawing on ‘Websters ‘MITA’ book’ (BC4a) through to being able to ‘share a vision with staff and SLT to create a positive and inclusive environment for all’ (BP2e). As such, respondents regarded themselves as having ‘expertise’ (BP1d) in teaching in an inclusive way. (n = 23). Mostly, this was due to ‘experience’ (e.g. BP3b, BP3g, BP5c) whilst for a more limited number it was due to the ‘wealth of information’ (BP6e) or knowledge acquired over time. Many participants wanted to share their vision and skills with other teachers (n = 28) by working alongside them. For example, one participant described being ‘happy to support other colleagues’ in administering the role

and to be strategic lead' (BP5d), whilst another wanted to 'help colleagues to do their job more effectively' (BS4e).

### *The teacher bound by pay, conditions and funding*

Externally imposed factors such as pay, career structures, school funding and classroom accountability exemplified another theme. These indirectly impacted upon the individual and the setting. Respondents described wider issues within their decision-making process. However, these were not always for reasons related to the development of inclusion or school based educational practice. Rather, these were defined within the realms of career development or enhancement and job security (n = 49). These included the need to provide worth to 'gain a permanent contract' (BP4a) or establish 'job security' (BP2c). The SENCo was also seen by some as a vehicle for career refreshment for those who were 'in need of a new challenge' (BC3f) or 'job satisfaction' (BC1a). Whilst another saw the whole school role as 'a chance to progress in my career' (BP7a). An 'increase in pay' (BP6a) was a consideration for some (n = 7). However, this was often tempered by external frameworks such as rules of pay progression. Indeed, one participant reported being at the 'top pay scale (MPS) and [therefore] needed to take on more responsibility' (BC7d). Indeed, the exosystem triad of the person, setting, and externally imposed working conditions is exemplified by one participant who explains 'After nine years of being in the classroom, I was fed up with the monotonous cycle of planning, marking, assessing, change in governmental ideas and was contemplating leaving teaching' (BP5d). This comment characterised participants with a pragmatic need (n = 20) or who expressed a desire for time away from the classroom (n = 17).

### *The teacher adhering to national SEN frameworks*

The final theme identified within the exosystem is the relationship between the person, the school and the external influences of compliance with statute. These reasons often reflected how the role is described within wider policy such as the key features of the SENCo role outlined within the Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) and the NASENCo learning outcomes (NCTL, 2014). For some this included being able to work closely with families of children (n = 22). One participant wanted to meet the requirement to liaise with children and parents in order 'to provide more holistic support to children and their families' (BP5a). For some identification and diagnosis of children with SEN was a driver (n = 8). The identification of



SEN using the current legal definition in the Children and Families Act 2014 (20:2) is shared by many participants who wish to make ‘early identification’ (BC4c) often using medicalised terminology such as ‘support and diagnosis’ (BC1c). The notion of relative difference is compounded by those who wish to see, ‘small steps of progress for a SEND child compared to the ‘average’ progress made by a none SEND child’ (BC3c). For some the adherence of policy and children getting their statutory entitlements was a driver (n = 26). One participant wanted to ‘make sure all statutory duties were met, including me being registered for the award’ (BP2a) whilst another wanted to ‘make sure I’m doing it properly in accordance with the CoP’(BS3e). Liaising with external agencies was important to others (n = 9) who wished to be able to ‘coordinate and commission services [for] children and their families’ (BP2e) or ‘develop relationships with external agencies’ (BC6c).

### **(3) *Macrosystem: ‘The developing culture of the English educational system’***

Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes the macrosystem as consistencies “that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying that system” (p. 26). Later revisions (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), specifically referenced “opportunity structures, life course options” (p. 149) as part of a “societal blueprint for a particular culture’ (p. 150) Anderson et al., (2014) add further clarity within the school context describing this system as incorporating political or national agendas and the externally imposed systems in which the school operates. This indirect influence of wider agendas was also reflected in why people chose to become a SENCo as within their responses, participants described themselves enacting policy using the language of policy (Ball, Maguire, Braun & Hoskins 2011 p. 622). As illustrated in Figure 4, these blueprints include the themes of belief systems incorporating equity, equality and inclusion in addition to the underlying ideology of the democratic right of participation. In turn, these are seen to be deliverable under a neoliberal school effectiveness framework.

Figure 4: Themes identified by SENCos (macrosystem)

#### *Equity, Equality and Inclusion*

For the first theme of equity, equality and inclusion, Participants liberally peppered their statements with the language associated with these ‘belief systems’ (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p.26) . Participants described placing a strong value on developing equity in society (n = 14) using terms such as ‘inclusive’ (BC2c), ‘equality’ (BC4b) and ‘equity’ (BP2e). This is

summarised by one participant who echoes wider policy through the suggestion that they ‘always had the view that inclusivity was essential for all’ (BP1e). Indeed, the language of policy such as potential, vulnerability, support and outcomes (for example, DfES, 2004 & DfE, 2011) was used by many to share aspirations for developing potential (n = 28). The current DfE Strategy (DfE, 2016) makes a distinctive focus on the ‘potential’ of all children (n = 28) measured by a range ‘rigorous, well-measured outcomes’ (DfE, 2016, pp. 10 and 20). The notion of the child having ‘potential’ was shared by several participants (BC1a, BC1c, Bc4d, BP2a, BS4e) however, this came with the caveat of needing ‘support’ (for example, BC1a, BC1c, BS4e).

### *School effectiveness: The Self Improving School*

The second theme within the macrosystem concerns the need to draw from leadership and school effectiveness frameworks to affect change. Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2017, p. 52) argue that often teachers use talk to evaluate a current situation and provide a range of alternative ways of acting. Many saw the SENCo as having a broader remit than the individual teacher and as a leader and agent of change within the school and wider society (n = 23) including one participant who suggested that the role enabled them to ‘make a difference where it really matters’ (BC3c). Indeed, this agency was shared by several participants most of whom described the desire to ‘make a difference’ (e.g. BC3c, BC3d, BC4a). However, for this ‘difference’ to occur, respondents thought that the role would provide status and an opportunity to be heard (n = 9) particularly if this voice was listened to by the senior leadership team (n = 9). Examples include one teacher who describes themselves as ‘a strong voice for... Children and Young People’ (BC4a) and another who just wishes ‘To have a say’ (BC7b). Notably, the importance of a status within the school improvement framework is telling in the one participant who describes her frustration at how ‘Lowly’ teachers’ opinions didn’t seem to count’ (BP1a). Another participant specifies the importance of how the position ‘allows me to have a voice on SLT’ (BC6e), whilst another believes that having this leadership voice would allow for them to ‘influence and make decisions’ (BP1d). Ideally, many participants considered that this role would enable them to have both voice and agency through becoming a school leader (n = 27) encapsulated by one participant who wants to be ‘part of the leadership team in school and therefore contribute to how the school is run.’ (BP6a). However, their reasons for aspiring to this position were not universal. For some, this was because ‘Safeguarding and SEN are both passions’ (BS1c)

whilst for others it is more about ‘career progression and opportunity to be on SLT’ (BS4c). These ideas could be synthesised into the belief that as an empowered SENCo, their status would allow them to change provision for children with additional needs (n = 39). Thus, this desire for leadership was intended to have the type of impact often described within school effectiveness frameworks such as within the Importance of Teaching (DfE, 2010). Examples include containment through management such as the participant who suggested that ‘the schools management of SEN needed to be more organised and up to date’, whilst another describes the progress associated with leadership in wanting to be involved in ‘developing systems in school to ensure that all pupils needs are met’ (BC3d) and to have ‘an impact on teaching and learning’ (BP1a). However, this was often with the caveat of adhering to school effectiveness framework such as by being able ‘to have an impact on moving our school into outstanding’ (BP6a). Participants also adhered to school effectiveness frameworks by sharing a projective leadership desire to develop and transform provision ‘to make sure that all the students’ SEN needs were met appropriately’ (BC1c). For example, one stated an interest in ‘Support[ing the] profile and up skilling of SEN teachers and TAs’ (BC6e) whilst another wanted to work strategically across the school ‘to support teachers in terms of supporting pupils effectively within the classroom by increasing their knowledge’ (BC6b).

### *The Right to Participation*

The final theme within the macrosystem is also reflective of wider ‘belief systems or ideology’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.26) - the right of participation. The most recent iteration of the Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) states:

‘There is a clearer focus on the participation of children and young people and parents in decision-making at individual and strategic levels’ (P .14).

In turn, this is reflective of wider international accords such as the Salamanca Agreement (1994, p.75) which advocated parental participation and Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) which articulated the rights of the child to have a voice and participate fully. Contributors described wanting to enable parents to participate in decisions about their children (n = 18) in a process of coproduction ‘to figure out what their barriers to learning are and how they can be overcome’ (BS3e) or indeed as ‘An advocate for ... parents’ (BS3a). Others meanwhile referred to children and articulated a desire to ‘give them a voice’ (BC2b) (n = 10). Many participants regarded participation as

much wider than providing voice and instead regarded participation in school life (n = 18) to ‘make learning fun especially with students who don’t really want to be in school’ (BS4b) and for children to work together to accept ‘differences’ (BP1f).

## **Discussion**

At time of writing, the DfE (2018) has recently commissioned work to address a further need to “build the specialist workforce and promote best practice” (3:12). This tender has asked organisations to provide solutions to the following statement.

‘Develop and disseminate a School Leader’s Guide to appointing and managing an effective SENCO.’ (DfE, 2018)

Within this statement, the word appointment is critical as it implies matching people to a role. This research aims to contribute to this wider discussion by trying to explore the reasons why people choose to apply for the role in the first instance. Amongst other things, the successful bidders for the contract are required to develop guidance on how a school may identify and appoint a teacher into the position of SENCo (3:12). Recent work on retaining the teacher workforce has only concentrated on existing issues including workload, regional variations, the need for CPD and cost of living (National Audit Office, 2018). Despite the obvious limitations of the data, the significance of this research is that it provides a holistic view to understand those who are already in the profession who wish to make an ‘ecological transition’ into another more complex school role. Indeed, although this data has not been gathered through exhaustive interviews over time, it does provide for a snapshot of a wide range of participants, many of whom are at the start of their career as a SENCo. To support analysis, Bronfenbrenner (2005) provides a holistic approach that helps us unpick that ‘the process [of becoming SENCo] is subject to the *interactive moderating effects* of both person and context.’ (p.78). Indeed, the analysis suggests that there is a distinct and rich interaction of the role of the SENCo and the socially constructed policy from which it is derived that participants use to describe their career interest. This research has implications for all schools in the recruitment or appointment of a SENCo.

***Implication 1: ‘Good recruitment is not just about appointing the ‘right person’. It is about understanding what your role offers and what the person is expecting.’***

Ellis, Skidmore and Combs (2017) provide the salutary warning that after recruitment, high rates of teacher satisfaction are commensurate with those who know what the role involved from the outset or as Bronfenbrenner (2005) describes, the ‘person and context’. Ellis et al. (2017) add another dimension by replacing the word ‘context’ with ‘job’ or ‘organisation’, thus allowing the teacher to make career decisions based on their knowledge of themselves and their knowledge of the job and organisation. This person – job/organisation fit could be potentially mismatched if there is lack of information provided by the employer. Prior to recruitment, they may provide little more than a generic range of person specifications and a few details about the ‘ideal candidate’ or ‘in return you will receive’. This makes it difficult for the prospective SENCo (person) to match their career interest with the role and school (job or context) to evaluate its suitability for them. If we are to build best practice, we need to start with the most essential resources within the system, the people. This includes understanding how different contexts have encouraged individuals to develop an interest in undertaking this complex role. Using the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979, 2005), the purpose of this article has been to explore why people choose to undertake the role of the SENCo – the person in the person context fit (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) or the person in the person – job/organisation fit (Ellis et al., 2017). This research suggests that teachers draw upon a wide range of different reasons when they embark on this career trajectory often through a ‘pick and mix’ approach drawing on a bricolage of personal, school and wider cultural and policy factors. Schools who are recruiting SENCos need to have an awareness of expectations of their future employees and that they will also come with a range of expectations and drivers. Importantly, for many participants these factors are not mutually exclusive but co-exist – teachers may simultaneously be ambitious, keen to take on management roles, pragmatic about policy and also have huge personal and emotional investment in issues of social justice. As teachers draw differently from these varying parts of each system, the study provides a way to help understand why each SENCo is individual and different in their interest and what they want to achieve within the role.

***Implication 2: SENCos may want different things from the role. Do schools know what they want from the role?***

As Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005) suggests, influences upon the person can be both proximal and distal. In a proximal sense, this research suggests that SENCos may draw from their own experiences when developing an interest in this role. These personal experiences are wide and

varied and can involve inspirational colleagues or teachers who they wish to emulate. Conversely, the personal experiences may be negatively driven by experiences of negotiating the system for their own child. Within the data, the participants express a desire to draw on experience to affect change in their settings. Indeed, as Mackenzie (2012) argues, these proximal experiences appear to lead to a deep sense of personal mission and emotional labour by many participants. It is important to note that all experiences shared by the participants in this study indicated a deep sense of needing to enact social justice. Indeed, as Thomas and Loxley (2007, p. 18) comment that in trying to improve education, they are acknowledging the successes, failures and experiences that have emerged from their own learning. This is important to note as each SENCo will bring a wide range of experience to their role which may be more than just an understanding of pedagogy, procedure and policy.

Although, SENCos often draw from direct personal experiences, they are also ultimately influenced by much wider factors both within school and on a national level. Following the centralised approach of past Labour governments (Alexander, 2004), the most recent efforts have been the development of SEN, through facilitating school to school approaches and the development of communities of practice (DfE, 2018) wrapped in the guise of a school effectiveness framework. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) argue that for communities to be effective, leadership is essential to “foster the integration of an effective knowledge system, and to promote a compelling vision of the knowledge organisation” (p. 159).

However, it is of note that out of this sample, only, 38% identified as being in a senior leadership role. If the SENCo is going to affect change, it will be important to refer headteachers and other senior leaders to the list of suggested duties within the Education (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators) (England) Regulations 2008. As an example, we can take one of these recommendations which is to advise teachers about differentiation (5:2, d). This would imply that the SENCo needs to be exceptionally knowledgeable, able to support teaching and learning and have opportunities to lead. However, how can this be achieved without adequate time, resource and authority? Indeed, participants often considered the opportunity to express themselves in a leadership position was an attraction of why they have embarked in this role in the first instance; another indicator that points to the need to understand the SENCo as a person within the person - job fit (Ellis et al. 2017).

If school leaders are to effectively recruit, retain and manage this group of professionals, it is important that they have a good understanding about the hopes and aspirations that each

SENCo brings to their school settings. Indeed, prior to any ‘management’ (DfE, 2018) the interest of the SENCo could be harnessed by school leaders who perhaps need to take the time to actively agree how the role should be operationalised on a day-to-day basis. This could be easily achieved through a joint agreement of the exemplar expectations of role shared in regulation and legislation. Only then, will there be a tacit agreement of role and a clear understanding of role boundaries which are required not only of the appropriate authority but also of the SENCo themselves who is charged with operationalising SEN policy on a day-to-day basis. Ideally, this should be an explicit part of the recruitment process and maintained to retain the SENCo over time.

***Implication 3: ‘Take care of what people say. People often inadvertently speak using the language of policy. What happens if policy changes?’***

Finally, it is noteworthy how participants often wish to work within the school effectiveness framework by aspiring to a leadership role in order to have greater influence. However, Wenger et al. (2002) also argue that effective leadership should continually question the ‘status quo’ (p. 159) and question what is taking place within the organisation. The participants wished to work within and change school structures or school practice. Here the SENCo is a policy user and a policy actor. Firstly, people have used their interest in the role to use policy to their own ends. The potential attraction of professional autonomy whilst working part-time is a factor in attracting some people to the position. Likewise, there is an attraction of escaping the day-to-day stresses of being a classroom teacher for others. These are honest appraisals of the difficulties of working in school settings; however, it is the way that the participants use the language of policy which provides a deeper insight.

As a policy actor, participants would seem adept at using the language of policy in questioning what is occurring within their organisations and suggesting change. Ball et al. (2011) warn that the use of the language of policy to describe a position comes with a warning in that when teachers use policy language to describe intent and action, they may be lacking the criticality required to make change. Within this study, the participants wish to evaluate their own settings and affect change from within which is akin to the arguments presented by Biesta et al., 2017, p. 52 who argue that when teachers talk, this is often used to evaluate their settings – the evaluative dimension; and suggest alternatives and change – the projective dimension. However, often this is with the caveat of acknowledging the tacit

realism of the policy that they wish to enact, i.e. that the policy itself is good and should not be questioned. Ball et al., (2011 p. 622) suggest teacher evaluation can be often based upon reflecting on policy and using this to judge their worth as a teacher often through vocabulary which is almost identical to that within policy itself. Essentially, SENCOs are describing a career interest confined and restrained within a policy echo-chamber. This is not say that there is lack of agency in what they want to achieve, nor, should it be argued that the policy is wrong, although others have posited these arguments (see Allan and Youdell, 2017). Indeed, there remains the possibility that SENCOs may have already considered the merits of current policy and either agreed with it or designed their own pragmatic response to work within it. Burr (2015, p.4) argues our action is a production of our knowledge; however, our knowledge is often not based on what there really is, rather it is a production of a range of different social processes. We only need to look at the different iterations of the code to understand that policy changes over time and we are now at a time of change, including performativity and embedded market forces (Lehane, 2015). If leaders are going to appoint and manage a SENCO, they need to be aware of what policy statements are influencing those who are expressing an interest in the position. It is important that both the leader and the SENCO has this joint understanding as the policy will ultimately as Burr (2015) argues impact upon action.

## **Conclusion**

This is the first time that investigating why people become SENCOs has been presented and understood through the lens of an ecological systems theory. It has sought to acknowledge that those who choose to work in this complex position draw on a wide range of personal, organisational and social factors in making their decision. Ultimately, this is the interest that these individuals express in this position. Before considering how we should appoint and manage these individuals, school leaders should have an in-depth understanding of these different factors. The framework provided in this paper presents a way that this data may be organised. However, it also provides a way in which this data can be questioned, interrogated and considered when recruiting SENCOs.

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