

Leadership in Inclusive Special Education:
A Qualitative Exploration of the SENCO
Role in Post-Primary Schools in Ireland.

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Declaration

I, Johanna Fitzgerald confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed: 

Abstract

This research considers approaches to leadership and management in inclusive and special education in six mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. It specifically explores the role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), the teacher with responsibility for the day-to-day implementation of policies relating to the inclusion of learners with SEN from the perspectives of six SENCOs and their Principals. The SENCO role is a recent phenomenon in Irish schools and while much is known of the role internationally, Irish SENCOs tend to operate in a policy vacuum.

An interpretivist paradigmatic approach braids together individual and contextualised stories through qualitative research. Data were generated primarily from individual semi-structured interviews with five SENCOs, five Principals, one Principal SENCO and one Support Teacher.

Findings reveal that SENCOs and their Principals were profoundly committed and personally invested in supporting students with SEN. While this study set out to explore factors influencing the ways in which schools led and managed inclusive special education, what it found was that the inherent relational nature of the SENCO role both supported and challenged SENCOs in equal measure. Human interaction in all its messiness enveloped the SENCO role in layers of complexity, which, when peeled back, identified at the core the inextricable link between SENCOs' unwavering duty of care to students and the burden such commitment placed on their professional and personal lives. Furthermore, school context is a fundamental influence on SENCOs' capacity to lead inclusive special education. Central to cultivating a culture which is inclusive, reflective, collaborative, responsive and flexible were Principals. Findings have implications for theorisation of the SENCO role, leadership in inclusive special education to facilitate collaborative approaches to change, and implementation of sustainable models of professional learning.

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This thesis is in many ways a collaborative endeavour, requiring support, guidance, and encouragement from the many personal and professional relationships that sustained me over the past four years.

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My gratitude extends to Dr. Patsy Daly, Head of the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education, for her unstinting support, wisdom and belief in my abilities as a researcher and fellow teacher educator. To my colleagues in the Department, and the wider Faculty of Education, your friendship sustained me throughout. Thank you.

Finally, to my family, this thesis is dedicated to you. In many respects, the doctoral journey was a selfish and often obsessive endeavour which consumed much of my time. To Paul, my husband and my parents Catherine and Greg (since deceased), my sincerest thanks for pulling together. To my children, Johnny and Kitty, I owe them time and much else besides. I am grateful for their capacity to forgive my absences as I journeyed through this doctorate. I'm back!

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Abbreviations

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools Initiative
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EBD	Emotional and/or Behavioural Disturbance
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs
ETB	Education and Training Board
GAM	General Allocation Model

HSE	Health Service Executive
MGLD	Mild General Learning Disability
NASENCO	National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
POR	Post of Responsibility
RACE	Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations
RTH	Resource Teaching Hours
SERC	Special Education Review Committee
SNA	Special Needs Assistant

Glossary of Terms

Direct Access Route to Education: DARE is a third level alternative admissions scheme for school-leavers whose disabilities have had a negative impact on their post-primary education. DARE offers reduced points entry to school leavers to compensate for the disability. Access to third level education in Ireland is highly competitive and requires students to obtain high grades to obtain a high point's score. Reducing the points for DARE makes it more accessible for students with disabilities.

National Council for Special Education (NCSE): The NCSE has a statutory function under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 to provide the Minister for Education and Skills with policy advice in relation to the education of students with SEN. Their role has grown significantly since its inception and they are responsible for allocating additional resources to schools to facilitate school responses to inclusive special education. In March 2017 their role was expanded when the Special Education Support Service, the National Behaviour Support Service and the Visiting Teacher Service, were amalgamated and service transferred to the NCSE Support Service. This means the NCSE will coordinate CPD for schools in the area of inclusive and special education.

Reasonable Accommodations in Certified Examinations: The RACE scheme is a centralised system available to all students eligible for reasonable accommodations in certificate exams (Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate). It is coordinated nationally by the State Exams Commission. Reasonable accommodations for students with literacy difficulties include access to a spelling and grammar waiver, access to a reader, assistive technology and/or audio device. However, strict eligibility criteria apply and students

must perform below a certain level in standardised and diagnostic school based literacy assessments. No psychological assessment is required.

Special Educational Need (SEN): A range of definitions of SEN exist. For the purposes of this study, the definition given in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) will be used. It states

‘special educational needs means, in relation to a person, a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition and cognate words shall be construed accordingly’,

(EPSEN Act, Government of Ireland, 2004)

The 2,000 Word Statement

Personal Learning Experience

In preparation for reflecting on the professional learning arising from my doctoral studies I revisited my self-reflective Annual Progress Review statements for each of the academic years from 2013-2016, the four written assignments and the formative feedback provided by the examiners. The three 5,000 word assignments related to the taught modules were:

1. *Module: Foundations of Professionalism:* Professionalism in Irish Post-Primary Schools; Are special education teachers professional?
2. *Module: Methods of Enquiry 1:* Special education teachers in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland: an exploration of factors determining their ability to influence whole school inclusive policy and practice.
3. *Module: Methods of Enquiry 2:* Piloting the research; special education teachers in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland: an exploration of factors determining their ability to influence whole school inclusive policy and practice

The *Institution Focused Study* (IFS) was completed in 2014-2015 and was submitted in September 2015. This 20,000 word empirical research project evolved from previous learning attributed to the three taught modules and related assignments. Entitled '*Victims of change or agents of change? An exploration of the SENCO role in post-primary schools in Ireland*', it was concerned with the SENCO role in mainstream post-primary schools in the Munster region of Ireland.

My research focus throughout the doctoral programme, as illustrated above, has dealt with the role of special education teachers in post-primary contexts in Ireland. A common thread connecting all taught assignments was the exploration of special education teachers' agency to

effect whole-school change relating to inclusive and special education. The initial assignment for the module *'Foundations in Professionalism'* explored literature relating to professionalism in education, and sought to contextualise empirical literature relating to SEN teaching internationally and in Ireland. Theoretical constructs relating to professionalism in education were explored and the paper drew on literature from commentators and theorists such as Fullan, Furlong, Hargreaves, Sachs, Boyt, Evans, Hoyle, and Whitty in an attempt to explore conceptualisations of professionalism and align them with the role of special educators. One of the key themes derived from the literature review associates professionalism with a level of expertise, which created a tension when interlocked with the practice of special education teaching in Ireland. No additional expertise, outside of a teaching qualification is necessary to teach in special education. It was in this assignment that initial correlations were made between the domain occupied by special education teachers in Ireland and the Theory of the Third Space developed by Whitchurch (2008). Conclusions derived from this thesis suggest that SENCOs do indeed occupy a space which is undefined, is characterised by *mixed teams of staff* whom may not have a sense of belonging in any particular team and whom are being called upon to create their own role and occupy a space that is unfamiliar to them and outside the boundaries of their knowledge, skills and expertise.

The second paper, written for the module *'Methods of Enquiry 1'* resulted in the development of a research proposal for the IFS. It required significant reading of both empirical and methodological literature relating to the research focus. Key themes derived from a review of empirical and conceptual literature were:

- inclusive education-evolution of inclusive education influenced by policy and legislative moves towards inclusive education;
- leadership and management in special education;

- teacher education in special education; and
- status of special education teachers.

While a review of the literature in the final thesis reflects similar themes (and more), the depth of understanding, and the framing of a conceptual and theoretical model is very much in its infancy in this second paper. Perhaps this resulted in the generation of research questions which, in hindsight, were far too ambitious and broad. Having completed two phases of empirical research during the doctorate, I now realise that the data collection method proposed in this paper was not the most appropriate method to answer research questions below.

1. To what extent does inclusive education form part of a schools' ethos and practice?
2. How important is the Principal's role in developing a schools' ethos and practice in inclusive education?
3. To what extent do special education teachers have a role in influencing a schools' ethos and practice in inclusive education?
4. To what extent does professional development in special education promote inclusive policy and practice in schools?

In my naivety I adopted a quantitative approach and aimed to survey the entire population of post-primary school principals and SENCOs in Ireland by way of an online interactive survey and use complex statistical analysis to report on findings (of which I know little about). I believe the research questions may have been more appropriately answered by way of small-scale qualitative research. For the third paper, linked to '*Methods of Enquiry 2*', a small pilot study linked to the proposal drafted in the '*Methods of Enquiry 1*' was undertaken. Needless to say, feedback from examiners and my experience in undertaking the pilot study caused me to reflect on its scale and feasibility. The online survey approach adopted for the pilot resulted in

a very poor response rate (12%). The survey, while exploring topics related to the research questions, also sought feedback from respondents about the survey approach (i.e. accessibility, length, relevance of questions, time taken to complete etc.). Feedback suggested a postal questionnaire would be more accessible to teachers and Principals. While I did learn new research skills-designing online surveys, using SPSS software-the pilot study taught me more about the research *process* than the research *topic* and resulted in a change in methodological direction for the IFS.

The IFS explored SENCOs' perceptions of their role and examined factors influencing role enactment in local settings. The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed methods approach within an interpretivist paradigm; namely self-completed postal questionnaires with both 'closed' and 'open' questions. The IFS represented Phase One of an overall sequential exploratory mixed methods approach (Cresswell, 2009; Robson, 2011). Analysis of the findings orientated the direction of Phase Two, this thesis. A purposive sampling technique was applied. Twenty-seven SENCOs representing five counties in Munster participated. SENCOs varied in relation to experience, gender, and status within the school. Variances in participants was also achieved by further stratifying the sample according to geographical location; composition; socio-economic grouping and language. Descriptive statistics of quantitative data and thematic analysis of qualitative data enabled the merged presentation of findings.

Findings indicated that SENCOs operated within a system of education that perpetuates a deficit view of SEN and disability. SENCOs continued to fulfil roles that were largely operational and were limited in their capacity to effect change to inclusive practice from a whole-school perspective. This related to a lack of status. More than half the sample were not assigned posts of responsibility in their schools. Elevating the role to the management team in

the school elevated the status attributed to the role and facilitated greater strategic planning for inclusion. No clear SENCO identity existed. The majority of SENCOs were fulfilling additional roles alongside the SENCO role. While a knowledge of special education was seen as necessary to effectively fulfil the role, knowledge and skills relevant to developing whole-school systems of inclusive practice were perhaps as important. Finally, findings also revealed that the role of the Principal was crucial in developing inclusive schools and elevating the status attributed to inclusive and special education.

The IFS informed the focus of the research for the thesis. My initial plan for the thesis was to conduct a qualitative study with a small purposive sample of post-primary SENCOs (selected from the IFS sample), to explore in greater detail the factors influencing role enactment. However, when data from the IFS were analysed, the critical role of Principal leadership in facilitating the SENCO role emerged as a dominant theme. I felt compelled then to include SENCOs and their Principals in the sample and explored the SENCO role and leadership in inclusive special education from both perspectives. A comparative analysis of data both within and across schools facilitated exploration of the dynamics between SENCOs and their Principals, which enhanced my overall interpretation and understanding of leadership in inclusive special education. Findings from this thesis concur with findings from the IFS but a deeper analytical approach was adopted to interpret why and how the SENCO role was so complex. This thesis also incorporated more extensive conceptual and empirical literature relevant to leadership in inclusive special education, the complexities attributed to inclusive special education, and the importance of situated professional learning to promote and implement change in schools.

Professional Outcomes and Impact

The doctoral journey has impacted significantly on my professional practice and I think my research is both timely and relevant. This impact has been felt in relation to my:

- teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate level
- supervision of student research to Masters level
- community engagement with post-primary schools
- research profile
- opportunity to inform policy

Teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate level

My contribution to both pre-service and in-service level teacher training programmes has been informed by personal learning related to the doctorate. Exploration of recent literature and research related to inclusive special education and leadership in inclusive education has influenced content design on both the Bachelor in Education (B.Ed) for Primary Teachers and the Postgraduate Diploma in SEN (PGDSEN) programmes. Furthermore, I have used findings from my own research to inform and develop specific content for post-primary SEN teachers undertaking the PGDSEN in relation to SEN coordination and leadership in schools.

Supervision of student research to Masters level

My understanding of the research process has been significantly deepened and *hangs* on my own experiences of engaging with research and in writing both the IFS and the thesis. I learn by doing and the *doing* of this research has moved my understanding of the research process beyond text-level understanding, to experiential understanding of the organic and non-linear process required to compile an empirical study. This experience has guided me in my

supervisory interactions with students at both undergraduate and postgraduate dissertation levels.

Community engagement with post-primary schools

One of the most significant professional outcomes of engaging with this research is the establishment of the Limerick SENCO Forum. Since its inception in April 2015, the Forum has grown considerably with almost thirty members and more than twenty Limerick schools represented. This thesis attests to the importance of professional learning communities as a sustainable model of professional learning. However, this thesis also found that SENCOs require collegial and professional support as they are often isolated in their roles. The Limerick SENCO Forum provides both professional learning and support *for* SENCOs *from* SENCOs. Three meetings are convened annually and attendance is outstanding, which perhaps reflects the importance of the Forum to SENCOs. As a model of support and professional learning for SENCOs, it has been effective.

Research profile

This research has solidified my identity as a researcher and academic in addition to my role as a teacher educator. I have availed of numerous opportunities to disseminate my research at both national and international conferences (see Appendix J) and am fortunate to work in an environment which supports and encourages research activity. Together with my supervisor, we recently published an article in the European Journal of Special Needs Education entitled '*Victims or agents of change: The SENCO role in post-primary schools in Ireland*' which reported on findings from the IFS stage of research. Also, a colleague and I were invited to join a Pan European project which recently applied for *Erasmus +* funding to develop, design and

implement a blended learning approach to professional learning for SENCOs in several European countries.

Opportunity to inform policy

My research activity has received interest from the Joint Managerial Body (JMB) Secretariat of Secondary Schools, which represents the views of all voluntary secondary schools in Ireland. It is the main decision-making and negotiating body for the management authorities of schools and is actively involved in policy and decision-making in Irish Education. I was invited to join the JMB SEN Advisory Group more than two years ago and have been fortunate to contribute my research to the ongoing debate at policy level relating to the SENCO role.

To conclude, I deliberately chose to undertake the EdD as its relevance to professional practice appealed to me. I wanted to learn and apply new learning to my professional role in Mary Immaculate College. It has positively influenced my practice as a teacher educator and researcher and has significantly increased the number of collaborative relationships I have developed along the way.

CHAPTER ONE: THE SENCO ROLE IN POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

1.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the context, rationale and research agenda for the thesis. It situates the research topic within historical and current policy and practice related to post-primary special education in Ireland. It provides justification for the research and concludes with the order of presentation for the thesis.

This study is concerned with leadership and management of special education in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. The post-primary sector is referred to internationally as second level or high school education and caters for students between the ages of twelve and eighteen. The term post-primary will be adopted throughout and will describe the three main types of schools at this level, namely: voluntary secondary schools (usually owned and run by religious organisations and tend to be single sex); comprehensive and community schools (State established, owned by boards of trustees, run by boards of management and tend to be co-educational) and vocational schools and colleges (run by Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and tend to be co-educational).

The remit of the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) varies internationally. Within some countries like Finland, such teachers are involved in direct support teaching with students in withdrawal settings (Takala et al, 2009). In contrast, the SENCO in the UK is intended to have leadership and management responsibilities (DfES, 2001; 2015) by coordinating provision for all students with SEN. They may not necessarily work directly with individual students but instead may monitor and evaluate student progress, consult with and advise

colleagues, and lead the SEN agenda in schools. While SENCO roles exist in other countries like Ireland (Fitzgerald, 2015; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011), Sweden (Lindqvist and Nilholm, 2011) and New Zealand (Hornby, 2012), a discernible absence of SENCO role consistency is evident in various contexts and across time (Mackenzie, 2007; Wedell, 2006).

This study aims to explore Irish SENCOS’ perceptions of their role, Principals’ perceptions of the SENCO role and to examine the factors influencing the execution of the role in local settings. Initially this research planned to glean only SENCO perspectives. However, findings from the IFS indicated that Principals were influential in supporting the SENCO and prioritising SEN in the school. I therefore felt it was important to incorporate their views in an attempt to triangulate data and draw comparisons with their SENCOS. The more closely aligned the attitudes, perspectives and values of the school Principal are with staff, the more effective schools are in responding to challenge and moving forward as a collective team (Netolicky, 2016). I wanted to explore the relationship between SENCOS and their Principals to try to understand the impact (if any) this had on SENCO role execution. This research also aims to extend and deepen my understanding of the SENCO role derived from a preliminary exploration conducted for the IFS stage of the doctorate. It represented an initial scoping exercise identifying potential sites for this more in-depth qualitative consideration of the role and collected data from a purposive sample of twenty-seven SENCOS in Munster post-primary schools. A lengthy postal questionnaire (see Appendix A) was the sole method of data-collection and findings served to identify potential participants for this study and orientate the direction of this final research phase. It is hoped that findings may inform policy and further identify systems and processes required to advance the SENCO role in Ireland.

1.1 Research Rationale

As a teacher educator with a number of years’ experience as a post-primary teacher and

SENCO, I responded to Dewey's call, reissued by Meiklejohn (1966, p. 83) for practitioners to think small and engage in local enquiry:

'It is unwise, Dewey tells us, to philosophize, to have and to use "general theories"...What is needed, " Dewey says, "is specific inquiries into a multitude of specific structures and interactions. Not only does the solemn reiteration of categories of individual and organic or social whole not further these definite and detailed inquiries but it checks them.'"

Guided by Dewey's appeal, the rationale for the proposed study is twofold. Firstly, I have an inherent interest in this area. My initial interest grew from my previous experience as a SENCO in a mainstream inner city London post-primary school where the role was integral to the promotion of whole-school inclusive practice. However, as a SENCO, and a relative newcomer to teaching at the time (five years), I found the workload overwhelming at times. I think perhaps I put this down to my own inexperience and perceived lack of skill until I joined a local SENCO Forum and realised that other SENCOs, well established in their roles, felt as I did. The workload was not only heavy, it was complex. When I decided to leave the UK and returned to Ireland I secured a position as a SEN Teacher in a local post-primary school. At the time, I worked mainly in isolation, on a withdrawal basis with a small number of students with special educational needs (SEN). I found this role isolating and quickly found the skills, knowledge and experience I had gained in the UK relating to the collaborative nature of my role begin to erode. Furthermore, after a year in this school an Assistant Principal post was advertised for the SENCO role, and while I would have been the most suitably qualified member of staff at that time, because of my *newcomer* status, a subject teacher with no expertise or experience in SEN was appointed to the SENCO role on a seniority basis.

The past eleven years of my career have been spent working as a teacher educator in the area of inclusive and special education and I have encountered many post-primary SENCOs struggling to define their role.

Furthermore, my experience as a SENCO in London taught me the value of and necessity for networking with other SENCOs. I believe the SENCO role is a unique role in a school and can be isolating for reasons which will be explored in Chapter Two. I wanted to create a professional learning network similar to the SENCO Forum in the UK for SENCOs in post-primary schools in my region and with the help of the Limerick Principals and Deputy Principals Association a network was established two years ago. Evaluative feedback from group members speaks of the importance of the group as a mechanism for: networking beyond the school walls; providing a platform for sharing of good practice; providing sustainable continuing professional development (CPD), and recognising the often isolating and hidden work accomplished by SENCOs.

Secondly, the educational landscape for students with SEN in all sectors has witnessed seismic transformation in Ireland since the early 1990's (DES, 2007; Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). Changes to Ireland's inclusion policy and legislation followed 'swiftly with little discussion' (Stephens and O'Moore, 2009, p.4) and have resulted in both an increase in the number of students with SEN and a more diverse range of students in mainstream schools (O'Gorman and Drudy, 2011). This has necessitated a change to special education provision and consequently the role of the SENCO. Internationally, it has been acknowledged that this role is complex and challenging (Cole, 2005; Norwich, 2010; O'Gorman and Drudy, 2011). In their Irish study *Professional Development for Teachers Working in Special Education/Inclusion in Mainstream Schools*, O'Gorman and Drudy (2011) found the workload of SENCOs was both difficult and heavy, and tended to increase incrementally. Findings from the IFS concur with both national and international discourse on the role. It is substantial, enormously administrative and predominantly operational (Fitzgerald, 2015).

Research from Ireland relevant to the role is scarce. While O’Gorman and Drudy (2011) conducted an extensive mixed-methods study exploring the professional development needs of SEN Teachers, a focus on leadership and conceptualisations of the SENCO role did not inform their study. Furthermore, the professional landscape for teachers is marred with instability and continues to evolve in a state of flux. While my own IFS collected some data related to SENCOs’ perceptions of their role, as a survey it lacked depth and was limited by the data-collection method employed. A qualitative exploration of the role from the perspective of SENCOs’ and Principals’ perceived views is timely to gain deep and rich insights into their lived experiences.

1.2 The Research Context

SENCOs and Principals from six mainstream post-primary schools in the mid-west region of Ireland participated in the study during the academic year 2015-2016. A profile of schools is presented in Chapter Four with further participant details appended to the study (Appendix D). A qualitative methodology was identified as the most appropriate in answering the research questions and facilitated a flexible approach to data-collection and analysis (Stake, 1995).

Situating this research within wider national and international research and policy arenas is necessary as it is these contexts that inevitably influence practice in local settings (Bottery, 2006). The next section situates the SENCO role within the broader socio-economic and political arenas shaping the Irish education system.

1.3 Contextual Factors in Ireland

A study of the SENCO role is particularly timely, as Irish society has undergone transformation in the past two decades and the education sector in particular continues to withstand unrelenting

reform. The contextual factors presented below encroach on schools' capacity to lead whole-school approaches to inclusive and special education and influence how the SENCO conceptualises and accomplishes the role.

1.3.1 Irish Education Policy and Legislation

The transformation of the Irish education system began in earnest more than two decades ago, with a policy drive towards inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream education settings (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). The year 1993 marked a watershed as it was only then that serious consideration was given to inclusion, with the publication of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) Report (Government of Ireland, 1993). This was the Irish governments' first attempt to address the complexity of education policy and provision for students with SEN. Broadly speaking, the report suggested some guiding principles which affirmed the right of children with SEN to an appropriate education along a *continuum of provision*, while promoting placement in mainstream education where possible. Placement would be determined by the child's *individual needs* and characterised by active parental partnership in the decision-making process. To this day, the SERC Report provides a blueprint for the advancement of inclusive education in Ireland and continues to guide policy formulation (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011).

Remarkably, the education system in Ireland was essentially unregulated by legislation prior to 1998 (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). The Education Act of 1998 was the first in a series of legislative developments to safeguard the needs of students with SEN. Influenced heavily by developments in the UK and underpinned by the Warnock Report (1978), the Education Act reflects constitutional pillars of 'equal access to, participation in, and benefit from an appropriate education' (Government of Ireland, 1998; Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). Legislation

followed in quick succession in the form of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, The Equal Status Act 2000, Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 and the Disability Act 2005 (Government of Ireland, 2000; 2004; 2005). EPSEN marked another significant milestone towards inclusive education but, due to economic constraints, important elements of the Act have yet to be implemented.

1.3.2 Inclusion Policy in Practice

An increasing number of students with SEN are being included in mainstream education (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). Consequently, there has been a substantial increase in the number of mainstream teachers involved in teaching these students. In 1993 there were 1,309 Learning Support Teachers and no Resource Teachers working in mainstream schools in Ireland. Latest statistics indicate that more than 11,000 SEN Teachers currently work in mainstream schools in Ireland (NCSE, 2016). Coupled with this the Irish education system has been marked by dramatic, and sometimes unwanted multiple initiatives like imposed standardisation and quality assurance, reconceptualised Junior and Senior Cycle curricular reform of the post-primary system, literacy and numeracy initiatives and general accelerated policy reform. This has implications in relation to pedagogy and teacher education and has necessitated a system-wide response to the growing heterogeneity amongst the student population in Irish schools (Fitzgerald, 2015). The exam-driven post-primary system is often incompatible with the needs of a diverse student population (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). This limitation is further aggravated by a teaching force primarily trained at a time when inclusive pedagogies didn't warrant importance due to the homogenous nature of Irish classrooms (O'Gorman and Drudy, 2010).

The deployment of SEN Teachers to mainstream schools is predicated on schools securing

additional resources from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and is mediated by regional ‘Special Educational Needs Organisers’ (SENOs) who are appointed by the NCSE to identify the level of resourcing granted to schools.

1.3.3 Delivery of Additional Resources

The current system of provision and resource allocation lacks consistency, and as a consequence, fails in many ways to provide adequate support to those most in need (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). Presently, resource allocation is built upon a deeply flawed and inequitable system (Desforges and Lindsay, 2010; NCSE, 2013; 2014; Rix and Sheehy, 2012; Rose et al, 2010) and is underpinned by the necessity for labels and categorisation of disability. Every child with a psychological and/or medical assessment and identified as having a Low Incidence disability, under the current system, can apply for and receive additional individual resource teaching hours (RTH). A General Allocation Model (GAM) supports students with High Incidence disabilities like dyslexia and those performing at or below the tenth percentile in standardised tests.

There are other significant challenges associated with the current system of resource allocation in Ireland (NCSE, 2014; Rose et al, 2010). Public services are grossly under-resourced to meet the demand in schools with lengthy waiting lists for assessments (NCSE, 2014). Very often, parents who can afford to pay for costly psychological assessments receive the necessary resources, while those who cannot must wait, resulting in inequity and a wholly unfair gap in provision. Awareness of this flaw in the current system was the catalyst for change which led to a full review of SEN provision (NCSE, 2014). A new model of resource allocation aims to address the present inequities in the system through the provision of additional resources in an equitable and efficient manner (hopefully). It promises a significant shift away from a model

of diagnosis, assessment and allocation of resources deeply embedded in the deficit model of disability, to one which identifies need at school level, diminishing the requirement for individual diagnoses and labelling. It seeks to facilitate the flexible deployment of teaching supports as needs emerge (NCSE, 2014). It also promises to promote school self-evaluation in relation to the measurement of progress and review of outcomes for students with SEN, little of which currently occurs (Douglas et al, 2012; Rose et al, 2015). The new model was piloted with 19 post-primary schools and 28 primary schools in the academic year 2015/2016 with full implementation planned for September 2017 (Minister for Education and Skills, 2017).

The Minister for Education and Skills in Ireland at the launch of the policy advice in 2013 called for research which would help inform policy with facts about what is happening on the ground. Contextual issues discussed herein will, of course, have implications for the coordination of SEN in schools and therefore this study offers a response to this call and gathered information from SENCOs and their Principals about their lived experiences in local settings.

1.3.4 Leadership in Post-Primary Schools in Ireland

This thesis specifically sought information from SENCOs about their role, but also decided to explore the role from the perspective of Principals. Findings from the IFS indicated the importance of Principal leadership to SENCOs' capacity to influence and lead whole-school approaches to inclusive and special education (Fitzgerald, 2015). I wanted to explore this in greater detail for the thesis. An approach to leadership which recognises that all teachers can assume leadership roles (either formally or informally) in the school community has been adopted in this study. When distributed leadership is fostered and nurtured it can create cultures of collaboration and cooperation (Hargreaves et al, 2007).

In terms of conceptualising leadership, Macbeath and Dempster (2009) provide a helpful distinction between *positional* leadership (e.g membership of the school’s leadership team) and *relational* leadership (lateral and vertical teamwork by all members of the school community). Positional leadership in its simplest form requires a ‘higher order set of abilities such as goal-setting, visioning, and motivating’ (Pearson et al, 2015, p.48). Relational leadership is concerned with how members of the organisation are connected through relationships of responsibility, cooperation, and trust and where strong cultures of teamwork, networking and participation are embedded in practice (Hargreaves et al, 2007, p.18).

Abundant references to the importance of collaborative, whole-school approaches to leading learning are to be found in Irish education policy documentation, which recognises that leadership should not reside solely with Principals and Deputy Principals¹. The complex nature of post-primary environments is acknowledged in the OECD report *Improving School Leadership: Policy and Practice* (OECD, 2008). In the report, distributed models of leadership are advocated to mitigate against the burdensome work of school Principals and enhance the teaching and learning experience for the entire school community. While the report adopts a definition of distributed learning as it applies to formal posts of responsibility (PORs) allocated (i.e. positional leadership) within schools, some of its broader conceptual origins can be found in the work of Spillane (2008) and Duignan (2007). Both theorists agree that distributed models of leadership are central to improving teaching and learning in schools, and furthermore, all members of the school community should be afforded opportunities to lead. The closer

¹ Recent examples include: The Post-primary Guidelines on the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools (DES, 2007); Looking at Our Schools 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-primary Schools (DES, 2016)

leadership is to the site of learning, the greater the learning experience is (Harris, 2001). Collaboration and teamwork are fundamental to the theory of distributed leadership. There is much literature expounding the benefits of teamwork (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Senge, 1998). Working together in a climate that fosters mutual protection, trust and cooperation is more effective and produces greater results than individuals working in isolation (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010).

Distributed models of leadership are evident in the post-primary sector in Ireland, both formally and informally (Humphries, 2010). Formal *positional* middle-management roles are taken to mean post-holders (see Appendix C for Posts of Responsibility (POR) structure in Irish post-primary schools), both Assistant Principal and Special Duties posts, which have been allocated further responsibilities outside of their teaching role and come with additional remuneration. These posts form the middle-management layer in schools. SENCOs may or may not have a POR at this level. Informal middle-management positions include subject coordinators, but can also include posts which fall outside the schedule of formal posts of responsibility and can include SENCOs. No additional remuneration is provided for those executing informal leadership roles. The significance of relational leadership to the SENCO role cannot be understated, whether the SENCO has a formal POR or not. In Ireland, economic recession and the impetus to reduce public expenditure has resulted in a moratorium on middle-management posts of responsibility (DES Circulars 0022/2009; 004/2014). When post holders retire or leave the school, the post is often lost. This has brought about a depletion of middle-management teams in schools and has impacted on the deployment of SENCOs (Fitzgerald, 2015).

On a more positive note, the current Minister for Education and Skills announced in his *Action Plan for Education* (DES, 2017) increased investment in education with much being channelled towards developing school leadership by increasing the number of middle and senior

management posts in schools. Furthermore, the moratorium on middle-management posts has been lifted, which, the Minister insists, ‘recognises the key role school leadership has in promoting a school environment which is welcoming, inclusive, accountable and focused on high quality teaching and learning’ (Press Release by Richard Bruton, Minister for Education and Skills, 2016).

In a qualitative study conducted by Humphries (2010) examining distributed models of leadership in post-primary schools in Ireland, she found that both formal and informal middle-management positions could be effective in bringing about change if a collaborative culture permeated the school and if learning was nurtured for all members of the community (Humphries, 2010). In essence, her research spotlights the importance of the Principal in nurturing collaborative cultures. Furthermore, while this study sought to explore leadership and the SENCO role, it acknowledges that there is capacity for SENCOs operating formally or informally within the school to lead change when collaborative learning approaches to leadership are fostered and embedded in school culture and practice. Chapter Two will explore in greater detail the characteristics of leadership which support transformation within the system.

1.3.5 The SENCO Role in the Broader Educational Context

The policy context in Ireland offers little guidance about the SENCO role. The *Post-Primary Guidelines on the Inclusion of Students with SEN* (DES, 2007) is the only policy document alluding to it and describes a role that is both strategic and operational. Furthermore, the role, as it is recognised in the international literature is not formalised in Ireland and the IFS (Fitzgerald, 2015) highlighted the existence of varying levels of practice. As a teacher educator in a College of Education and Liberal Arts in Ireland, I teach, amongst others, qualified teachers

working towards a postgraduate qualification in special education. I have been working in this capacity for six years. During my interactions with post-primary teachers I discovered an increasing number of teachers identifying with the title ‘SENCO’ with minimal policy guidance as to what the role entails. The terminology does not exist in Irish policy documentation and teachers fulfilling the role are referred to as ‘coordinating teachers’ (DES, 2007). The *Post-primary Guidelines* (DES, 2007) promote a distributed approach to leadership of SEN and assume the Principal will have overall responsibility, but may devolve duties to a member or members of the special educational needs team (if indeed there is one). However, delegation of duties does not necessarily equate with leadership responsibility (Netolicky, 2016).

Encouragingly, the role has recently received some attention at policy level in Ireland. The imminent implementation of a new model of resource allocation (Minister for Education and Skills, 2017; NCSE, 2014) has raised concerns at school and national level as to how this will impact the SENCO role. As a member of a national policy advisory group representing the post-primary sector in Ireland I have contributed my research to the debate. There is an impetus (from school management bodies) to formalise the role and there is no better time to gather empirical evidence to support its formalisation. At a time when the DES is focused on developing school leadership, I remain hopeful, that with sustained research-informed discussion with the DES and the NCSE, that progress towards formalisation of the SENCO role will be made in the future.

Findings from the IFS stage of my research indicate that an amalgam of systemic issues peculiar to the Irish post-primary sector have added to the complexity of the SENCO role which has resulted in role ambiguity. The casualisation of job tenure in the post-primary sector in Ireland creates challenges for SENCOS. Part-time teachers (of which there are many) are

allocated resource teaching hours as timetable fillers to supplement their subject teaching load; often, these teachers are the least experienced members of staff (O’Conluain, 2007). This has significant implications for students and schools, one of which relates to the organisation and coordination of special education provision in schools and moreover, the tasks assigned to the SENCO, who in many instances has responsibility for timetabling their teaching, overseeing SEN provision and identifying relevant CPD.

Another systemic issue relates to how the SENCO is appointed in schools. In the UK, the SENCO usually applies for the post, which in most cases carries a POR at middle-management level and requires a postgraduate qualification relevant to the role. In contrast, many SENCOs in Ireland are being called upon to volunteer their services and fulfil the role in their *spare time* (Fitzgerald, 2015). Findings from the IFS reveal that most SENCOs had no formal post and either volunteered to coordinate SEN, or were asked by their Principal to take on the role (Fitzgerald, 2015). Notwithstanding the moratorium on middle-management posts, as the role has not been formalised there is no recognition in policy of the need to elevate the SENCO to a management position and as a result the SENCO role may or may not carry a POR in schools. This in turn creates ambiguity around role interpretation and execution.

1.4 International Dimension of the Study

The evolution of an inclusive system of education in Ireland is underpinned by international legislation (United Nations, 1948; 2006) and is informed by international developments. The NCSE is an independent statutory body in Ireland established in 2003 to improve the delivery of educational services to people with special educational needs (SEN) and allocate additional resources to schools to meet their needs. However, a substantial component of NCSE work involves commissioning research relevant to best practice in the field of special education. This

international research provides a basis for developing policy advice as appropriate to the Minister of Education (see for example, Daly et al, 2016; Desforges and Lindsay 2010; O'Mara et al 2012; Rix et al 2013; Rose et al, 2015; Winter and O'Raw 2010). However, while much has been written internationally -and particularly in the UK-about the role of the SENCO in mainstream education (Arnaiz and Castejon 2001; Cole 2005; Kearns, 2005; Layton 2005; Lewis and Crisp 2004; Oldham and Radford, 2011; Szwed 2007; Takala et al, 2009; Tissot 2013), a scarcity of research exists concerning how this role is enacted in the Irish context. This study will draw on international research in an attempt to conceptualise the role in Irish mainstream post-primary settings, within a transforming national legislative and policy framework.

1.5 Order of Presentation

This study is presented over six chapters. Many of the concepts outlined above are addressed in the literature on SEN coordination and inclusive school leadership. Chapter Two critically explores this literature.

Chapter Three discusses epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the study, describes and justifies the methodology chosen to undertake the research and outlines approaches to data-collection and analysis. It also provides justification for the selected sampling strategy and sketches details of participating sites.

Key findings derived from interviews with Principals and SENCOs are thematically analysed in Chapter Four while Chapter Five discusses these findings by adopting a macro view relative to their overall contextualisation within a broader range of cognate issues existing in the extant literature.

The concluding chapter, Chapter Six, explicitly addresses the research questions, synthesises

key findings and identifies limitations of the study. Conclusions are drawn and recommendations made which will support further development of the SENCO role with specific reference to the implications for policy and practice. It also reinforces the unique contribution this research makes to the existing body of knowledge and signals areas of future research. Personal outcomes and future plans for dissemination are also outlined.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented the rationale and the overarching aims of the study. It also contextualised the thesis within a policy and legislative framework which does not formally recognise the role of the SENCO. The research focus derives from my own previous experience as a SENCO and my current experience as a teacher educator. It is also driven by an imperative to formally recognise the work involved in SEN coordination, particularly at the post-primary level, and the importance of inclusive leadership in promoting whole-school responses to educational provision for students with SEN (Fitzgerald, 2015).

CHAPTER TWO: LEADERSHIP IN INCLUSIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION

2.0 Introduction

Chapter One introduced the focus of the study and explored contextual matters relevant to the SENCO role both nationally and internationally. Key issues arising from legislative and policy

change, and their associated impact in practice set the scene for an exploration of the literature relevant to leadership and management in inclusive and special education. However, while the terms *inclusive* and *special* education thus far appear to be harmoniously married, more recent discourse suggests that both are perhaps ‘diametrically opposed’ (Hornby, 2015, p.234) and whispers relating to a reimagined theoretical frame for understanding ‘inclusive special education’ are infiltrating the literature (Hornby, 2015). This will be explored more thoroughly in this chapter.

A critical consideration of conceptualisations of the SENCO role set against a shifting backdrop advocating inclusive education will be undertaken and this chapter will chart the rich literature stream relating to inclusive and special education. As a phenomenon, inclusive education is complex, highly contested and is characterised by significant ambiguities (Dyson, 2009; Mitchell 2005; Salend, 2011; Thomas and Loxley 2007). Literature points to a historical inclination to take for granted ‘constructs of special educational needs and systems of provision’ (Rosen-Webb, 2011, p. 159) with little consideration of ‘complex forces and vested interests locally, nationally and globally’ that influence policy and practice related to SEN (Tomlinson, 2005, p.159). A critique of its complexities and dilemmas, couched within a transforming social, economic, cultural and educational setting will go some way towards formulating an understanding of the complexity of the SENCO role.

Notably, three broad themes emerged from a review of the literature. The first deals with evolving conceptualisations of inclusive and special education and their influences on policy and practice. Any understanding of the SENCO role must be connected to the inherent complexities attributed to inclusive and special education. The second theme examines the interactions between SENCOs and their contexts in an attempt to understand the complexities of the SENCO role. The final theme critically outlines the role of leadership within schools,

and its impact upon the SENCO role, but more importantly, its impact upon whole-school collaborative and collective interaction with an educational landscape under constant construction. A school's capacity to lead change assumes a commitment to learning and underpins this section. This thesis situates professional learning at the core of the learning organisation (i.e. school) and highlights the centrality of leadership in creating schools as sites committed to growth and learning for all members of the community. Deriving insights from the research literature reviewed herein, the conclusion will suggest some key constructs of inclusive leadership in educational organisations, which will serve as a theoretical framework for the analysis to be undertaken in successive chapters.

2.1 Inclusive Education for Students with SEN

Internationally, and in Ireland, inclusive education is fundamental to contemporary discourse and reflects societies' commitment to wider social inclusion (Egan, 2013). However, recognising the need for appropriate education for children with SEN in Ireland took some time to catch up with international moves towards inclusive education (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). The term *inclusive education*, although widely used, offers no universally accepted definition (Armstrong et al, 2010; Florian, 1998; 2008; Norwich, 2012; Salend, 2011; Winter and Raw, 2010). This presents challenges in defining it and therefore recognising it in schools. Significantly, unless a clear definition is adopted, the term inclusive education becomes meaningless (Armstrong et al, 2010). The inability to *pin down* a definition creates ambiguity and SENCO role conflict (Dyson, 1993; Norwich, 2010), as this person is often tasked with leading and implementing special and inclusive education policy. The first section of this chapter distils from the literature on inclusive and special education the theoretical framework that will be adopted for the thesis relating to inclusive and special education.

2.1.1 Is inclusive education enough to be synonymous with special education?

It is commonly acknowledged that inclusive education is complex and challenging (Mitchell, 2008; Skidmore, 2002; Slee, 2009; Rose et al, 2015), is context specific and is characterised by a strong local flavour (Dyson, 2009). While inclusive education seems to have become ‘fashionable’ and the term bandied about in a taken for granted manner that assumes understanding, confusion abounds as to what it actually looks like in practice (Armstrong et al, 2010, p. 236). Generally, inclusive education is underpinned by the broader term *inclusion* and is considered to be:

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

(Hornby, 2015, p.235)

Much of the literature on inclusive education seems preoccupied with debating appropriate placement (Rose et al, 2015). Ongoing debate remains a site of contention and the term *inclusive education* seems to be synonymous with placement in a mainstream setting (Hornby, 2015). Chapter One briefly outlined the approach adopted in Ireland, which supports a *continuum of provision* (Rose et al, 2015). Interestingly, a recent review of the literature on the continuum of provision (Rix et al, 2013), while identifying twenty-nine different types of provision, advises caution and insists that an effective continuum

‘needs a spread of inter-connected services and levels of services which are preventative, proactive and responsive at a group and individual level, and which share expertise and knowledge, spreading pressures across the system, being locally owned, cooperatively developed and responsive to top-down policy.’

(Rix et al, 2013, p.26)

Ireland’s relatively recent commitment to inclusive education places it at the embryonic stages of this complex process and therefore much support is needed to develop the services and

systems outlined by Rix and his colleagues (2013). Developing effective systems of support and relationships between schools and external agencies and within schools is critical to the furtherance of inclusive education (Drudy and Kinsella, 2009). This has implications for the SENCO, who can have an instrumental role in establishing such systems and relationships, but research suggests that the role is underdeveloped in this regard (Fitzgerald, 2015; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011; Travers, 2010).

Proponents of *full inclusion* (Barton, 1997; Stainback and Stainback, 1992) insist that all children with SEN, irrespective of their level of need, have an *entitlement* to be educated in mainstream schools. Moreover, the development of full inclusion is compromised by the very existence of segregated provision (Barton, 1997; Ferguson, 2008). However, is this always the best option for the child? Recent discourse challenges this view and many jurisdictions, while committed to the principles of inclusion (i.e. placement in mainstream) provide a variety of segregated learning opportunities along a continuum. However, being present in classrooms does not assume participation in the learning experience (Norwich, 2008; Warnock, 2005). Many insist that full inclusion is unachievable and unrealistic (Hornby, 2015; Kauffman and Badar, 2014) with some writers going so far as to contend that inclusive education has proved detrimental to educational experiences for those with SEN:

‘Ironically, the promotion of the delusion that being present in a school equates with being socially and educationally included, is one of the most dishonest and insidious forms of exclusion.’

(Cooper and Jacobs, 2011, p.6)

Nonetheless, while policy advocates an entitlement to inclusive education, exclusionary clauses permeate both national and international legislation facilitating an opt-out for schools, thereby supporting the development of a dual system of mainstream and special education (Meaney et al, 2005).

The controversial concept of inclusive education continues to influence special educational needs policy and legislation in many countries (Mitchell, 2009; Thomas and Loxley, 2007). But where does special education sit within inclusive education?

The development of a dual system (continuum of provision) in Ireland and elsewhere has led to ‘the historical isolation of special education from mainstream education and has facilitated the persistence of certain myths about children and young people who have special educational needs’ (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011, p.2). Special education in Ireland equates to steering students onto the exit ramp, withdrawing them from regular classrooms and their peers for special teaching, without any route map for return to their classrooms (Egan, 2013). Is this to be considered inclusive education? It was (is?) assumed that children with SEN are intrinsically different to their peers and require a specialist esoteric pedagogy (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). Educationalists variably describe what constitutes special teaching (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011; O’Murchu, 1996; Westwood, 2013) but essentially it relates to how teachers enable access to learning for students with SEN by means of appropriate methodologies, resources and materials and ‘with an attitude that actualises all of this by way of a meaningful and empowering relationship with the student’ (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011, p.113). Specifically, special education is characterised by: an individualised approach to assessment and planning; specialised and intensive instruction from SEN experts; goal oriented teaching; research based instructional practices; collaborative partnerships; and monitoring and evaluation of student outcomes (Salend, 2011). Except for specialised and intensive instruction from SEN experts, could it not be argued that the characteristics of special education are representative of just good teaching?

There are distinct philosophies associated with inclusive and special education (Hornby, 2015). Are they as diametrically opposed as Hornby (2015) would have us believe? There appears to

be some consensus in the literature that all teachers should be able to teach all students and that effective teaching for students with SEN is effective teaching for all (Frederickson and Cline, 2009; Griffin and Shevlin, 2011; O'Murchu, 1996). However, while many argue for a universal approach to including students with SEN (Florian and Linklater, 2009; Norwich, 2010), others such as Kaufmann and Hallahan (2005) and Carroll et al (2011) insist that the mainstream classroom is not always the 'least restrictive environment' in a current standards-based system of education (IDEA, 2004 cited in Carroll et al, 2011). The discourse on special education supports a cautionary approach and acknowledges that *some* students require highly individualised approaches to learning, in an environment that can facilitate meaningful access to and engagement with the academic, social, and emotional learning (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994; 2006), with the reality being that placement in a special setting might be more appropriate for some students. Supporters of inclusive education argue that labelling of students and development of individualised programmes, whether in mainstream or specialist settings, stigmatises them and that this should be avoided. This creates a dilemma; if students are identified as having SEN, they risk being labelled and stigmatised, yet if they are not identified, it could prevent them from accessing the education that they need (Kauffman and Badar, 2014). Norwich (2008) refers to this as the *dilemma of difference*, which creates a tension in both policy and practice.

These tensions are evident when policy insists on 'common access to, participation in and benefit from' learning experiences (Government of Ireland 1998, Part II Section 9) which is then 'set against the realities of limited teacher skills, exclusionary pressures in schools and, above all, substantive differences between students' (Dyson, 2001, p.27). It represents what Meaney et al (2005) describe as a balancing act to provide for the best interests of all. How do teachers address individual needs without disadvantaging others and using increasingly diminishing resources effectively? The dilemma for Norwich (2008) involves 'accepting some

crucial losses' (p.302). Acknowledgement of inherent tensions admits a sustained 'struggle with ambivalence', an appreciation of different needs and recognition 'that what counts as progress and improvement can be problematic and can contain contradictions', (Norwich, 2008, p.498).

Conceptualisations of inclusive and special education derive from sites of conflicting paradigms (Mitchell, 2009) where two prevail-the 'within child' or deficit paradigm built upon a psycho-medical construct and the social constructionist approach (Barton, 1997; Mittler, 2009; Skidmore, 2002; Slee, 1997; Tomlinson, 2005). The former attributes school failure to deficits within the child (Barton, 1997; Corbett, 2001; Mitchell, 2009). It assumes that a disability or special educational need is a stable, pathological trait located within the individual that can be reliably diagnosed and categorised (Skidmore, 2002). The latter paradigm assumes that society creates barriers which inhibit access for people with disabilities and which are constructed to serve the interests of the social majority (Mitchell, 2009). Deficit views of disability, which dominated educational policy and practice in the last century, have been replaced by a more sociological response to disability (Barton, 2003).

Acknowledgement of the role of physiological, psychological, environmental and social dynamics in the aetiology of SEN now underpins current understanding of SEN. In the UK, the Warnock Report (1978) and subsequent Education Act (1981) reflected a paradigmatic move away from a psycho-medical approach towards a sociological response. The Warnock Report heavily influenced policy and legislation in Ireland where currently a *bio-psychosocial model* (NEPS, 2007), involving an ecological view (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) underlines responses to SEN. This paradigm shift is reflected in the SERC Report (1993), the Education Act (1998), the EPSEN Act (2004) and more recently in policy guidance related to the new model of resource allocation (DES Circular 0014/2017; NCSE, 2014) which promises a shift

away from a focus on individual student pathology (Rose et al, 2015) towards ‘a critique of existing organisational policies and practices’, (Rose et al, 2015, p.24).

Inclusive education no doubt delivers challenges to schools but some would argue that ‘inclusion is not a matter of where you are geographically, but where you feel you belong’, (Warnock 2005, in Terzi, 2010, p. 35). According to Baroness Warnock (2005) it is critical ‘since a feeling appears to be necessary both for successful learning and for more general well-being’ (in Terzi, 2010, p.35). However, a sense of belonging alone may not be sufficient in creating effective learning environments according to Carroll (2008). In a case study exploring the critical components of inclusive school cultures and their influence on educational services for students with significant and complex needs in one high school in America, Carroll found that while ‘strong cultures provide the internal cohesion that makes it easier for teachers to teach, and students to learn’ (Carroll et al, 2011, p.124) it is not enough to provide academic instructional excellence for students with significant needs. Perhaps a deconstruction of the field of special education and a reconstruction of a mainstream system that can meet the needs of all students is required (Norwich, 2008) to create *cultures of belonging* where instructional practices are informed by evidenced based interventions in *special* education and taught by suitably qualified teachers.

The enterprise of inclusive education has failed insists Hornby (2015), who calls for a reconceptualisation which will comprise a synthesis of the ideology, philosophy and values of inclusive education with the evidenced based practices and instructional approaches of special education. He calls this new theoretical framework *inclusive special education* (Hornby, 2015, p. 236).

2.1.2 Deconstructing Inclusive *and* Special Education and Reconstructing Inclusive Special Education

The resilience of the psycho-medical paradigm has contributed to the persistence of deficit views of dis/ability (Rix et al, 2013). The emergence of a bio-psychosocial response to SEN, while reflected in policy, has some distance to travel vis-à-vis implementation in schools. The current approach to allocation of additional resources to students with SEN in Ireland is entrenched in a psycho-medical model and is fraught with difficulties (NCSE, 2014). Timely access to appropriate supports and services is insufficient (DES Circular 0014/2017; NCSE, 2014). Approaches to individualised planning and evaluation of student outcomes are inconsistent (Douglas et al, 2012).

Inclusive and special education, while sharing the discourse arena, are presented as two (incompatible?) perspectives which has created confusion. Hornby (2015) offers a balanced model which goes some way towards addressing current needs. *Inclusive special education*, insists Hornby:

‘is about providing the best possible instruction for all children with SEND, in the most appropriate setting, throughout all stages of a child’s education, with the aim of achieving the highest possible level of inclusion in the community post-school. Its focus is on effectively including as many children as possible in mainstream schools, along with the availability of a continuum of placement options.’

(Hornby, 2015, p. 247)

Guiding principles informing Hornby’s Model of Inclusive Special Education are illustrated in Figure 2.1 and fully outlined in Appendix B. Central to *inclusive special education* is the quality of teaching and learning afforded to students with SEN. Implementing effective practice must consider established, evidenced-based interventions which are informed by strengths-based individualised profiling of students, insists Hornby (2015, p.247).

Furthermore, while the model recognises and advises that the majority of students can and should be educated in mainstream classrooms, it advocates for a continuum of provision to meet a continuum of need for students with significant and complex needs. However, placement along the continuum should allow movement and flexibility between placements in response to students' strengths and needs.

Another guiding principle insists on the importance of developing effective organisational procedures and systems to optimise learning for all students with SEN. Such an approach requires a response at all levels of the education system from policy to practice. The model advocates for the formalisation of SEN provision in schools and recognises the importance of developing whole-school capacity to respond to the diverse needs of students; from specialist support teachers providing individualised, evidenced-based interventions to universal approaches which support all teachers to identify, assess and cater for the needs of students with SEN in their classrooms.

Central to Hornby's model is the facilitation of close collaboration between mainstream and special schools and classes. In building capacity along the continuum, Hornby advocates the use of special schools, not only as providers of special education, but as providers of guidance and support to assist mainstream schools.

Figure 2.1: *Model of Inclusive Special Education (Hornby, 2015, pp.247-251)*



The

model promoted by Hornby sits comfortably within an Irish education system claiming to offer a continuum of provision and services for students with SEN along a continuum of need (Rose et al, 2015). The features of inclusive special education form the analytical framework for this study, and will support an understanding of the SENCO role within a system of education under constant construction.

The second theme to emerge from the literature relates to the complexities surrounding the SENCO role, set against a turbulent policy backdrop of inclusive special education which will now be discussed.

2.2 Inclusive Special Education and the Role of the SENCO

The advance of inclusive and special education has delivered challenges to leadership and management of provision for students with SEN and tensions and ambiguity shroud

conceptualisations of the SENCO role (Pearson et al, 2015). Dominant themes in the literature in the recent past have been concerned with aspects of leadership and management (e.g. Cole, 2005; Tissot, 2013) and the extent to which SENCOs are agentive. Yet, Pearson et al (2015) in a study investigating SENCOs' insights into the future direction of their role in a changing policy context, remind us that in many jurisdictions SENCOs fulfil an advisory role, equipped with specialist knowledge to provide specialist instruction to specific students and whom may be called upon to advise colleagues. Their study drew on qualitative responses from 326 respondents to a national survey of SENCOs in England (2012) at a time when policy changed and related specifically to the open question; 'Thinking about the role of SENCO in your school, how do you see it changing in the short (1-5 years) term?' While the survey itself was far more extensive, with much written elsewhere, the analysis of qualitative responses to this question were deemed relevant to the current thesis as SENCOs' roles in Ireland are also set to change as a result of policy. Interestingly, SENCOs predicted that there would be a reduction in direct teaching with an increased involvement in staff training and other whole-school capacity building activities.

The IFS (Fitzgerald, 2015) reported similar findings which creates a dilemma for SENCOs, many of whom derive the greatest job satisfaction from direct teaching. The survey approach adopted in Pearsons' study, not unlike the questionnaire approach in the IFS, did not provide the scope to explore this dilemma in any great detail. Nevertheless, an emphasis on the SENCO's role in leading whole-school approaches to provision for students with SEN, over their specialist knowledge of SEN-specific issues and ability to provide special teaching, only serves to 'contribute both to clarifying and to muddying the role' (Rosen-Webb, 2011, p.160).

Furthermore, while legislative and policy guidance has tended towards a more universal approach to provision for students with SEN (DES, 2007), research indicates that the role of

the SENCO should be assigned to the senior management team in the school in order to lead the SEN agenda and elevate its status (O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011; Layton, 2005; Oldham and Radford, 2011). In their qualitative study exploring ten secondary SENCOs understanding of leadership and its relevance to their role, Oldham and Radford (2011) question whether the SENCO role should be universal or specialist, which serves to highlight the tension in policy between SENCOs as leaders of whole-school approaches to SEN and SENCOs as specialists, using advanced expertise to provide appropriate instruction for some students.

The following sections seek to contextualise and understand the SENCO role as it evolves and is set against a backdrop of complex forces, within and outside the school.

2.2.1 Defining the SENCO Role: A Challenge Too Great?

The SENCO role is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the UK it was initially established in 1994 with the implementation of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) which directed all mainstream schools to appoint a SENCO who would be responsible for coordinating provision for students with SEN and SEN Teachers to develop and implement appropriate learning opportunities for these students. The emerging SENCO role in post-primary schools in Ireland is evolving in an ad hoc manner (Fitzgerald, 2015; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011). Notably, a discernible absence of SENCO role consistency is evident in various contexts and across time (Hornby, 2014; Mackenzie, 2007; Wedell, 2006) and leads to difference in practice as the duties change over time (Cole, 2005; Layton, 2007). This is in part owing to the multiplicity of interpretations of inclusive (special) education and how it is interpreted in individual settings (Mackenzie, 2007).

Kearns (2005) provides a typology which acknowledges the varying approaches to the role. In his qualitative case study with eighteen SENCOs in primary schools in Northern Ireland,

Kearns sought to assist SENCOs to identify opportunities for situated learning and ascertain the possibilities for accredited learning projects at Master’s level. He identified patterns of development and change in how the SENCO role was enacted through SENCO narratives, focus group workshops and individual interviews. Kearns collected personal narratives from participating SENCOs engaged in extended reflection about their professional and personal experiences and used these to orientate the focus group discussions. As the study was conducted in a different jurisdiction, focused on the primary sector and was small-scale, there is little capacity to generalise to wider populations and therefore external validity is limited. This study was couched within an interpretivist paradigm and acknowledged the subjective construction of knowledge. Findings are nevertheless relevant and facilitate theoretical generalisation (Yin, 2014).

Kearns’ study is echoic of findings from research conducted by O’Gorman and Drudy (2011) and holds some relevance to the SENCO role in Ireland. While Kearns’ focused on the professional identities formed by SENCOs, an analysis of O’Gorman and Drudy’s study in tandem offers insight into the roles and responsibilities of SENCOs, which in part influence identity. Kearns analysis resulted in the development of five SENCO role types/performing styles (Table 2.1) which he stresses are not considered definitive and many SENCOs felt they shared several roles.

Table 2.1: *SENCO Typologies* (Kearns, 2005, pp.137-145)

SENCO Type	Description
Arbiter	Focused on helping others like teachers and parents feel positive about inclusion; negotiating, rationalising and monitoring the use of resources and using a range of information sources to facilitate colleagues’ professional development.

Rescuer	Focused intensely on individual teaching with individual learners with SEN; demonstrate great empathy and commitment while lacking interest in management or collaborative work with others. This seems akin to the traditional role of the learning support/resource teacher in Ireland and which continues to motivate those working in the role.
Auditor	Emphasis placed on the management and administration of special education provision; monitoring of learner progress, IEP management, record keeping with a focus on meeting legal requirements. This role suggests one which is purely managerial which feels empowered by bureaucratic frameworks.
Collaborator	Focused on relationships with others, maintaining strong links with classroom teachers; keen to share practice and engage in collaborative curriculum planning; tend to work in schools where distributed leadership is promoted and where SEN is established as a school-wide process.
Expert	Focused on the SENCO as <i>specialist</i> with additional qualifications in teaching learners with severe or specific disabilities; often with responsibility for teaching in specialist units attached to mainstream schools.

The role types identified by Kearns underline the importance of flexibility in role definitions asserted by O’Gorman and Drudy (2011). While the focus of their study was to explore the professional development needs of SEN Teachers and not SENCOs specifically, O’Gorman and Drudy make reference to the individual professional learning needs of SENCOs, some of which are unique to this group. This study is perhaps the most extensive study undertaken in Ireland in that it sought participation from all post-primary schools and a large sample from primary schools. Data were initially collected in the form of questionnaires from 196 primary Principals and 212 post-primary Principals, and from 417 primary and 399 post-primary SEN Teachers. Participant schools represented a quarter of a million students, with each county in Ireland represented. Findings accurately reflected the wider population. Due to the scale of the study transparency is provided in terms of how data were analysed and the external validity of these tried and tested instruments have been established (Winwood, 2013).

Furthermore, the questionnaire design from O’Gorman and Drudy’s study (2011) was adapted

for use in the IFS and similar patterns and themes emerged, which serves to increase the validity of the instrument (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). As a mixed-methods study, a further phase of qualitative data-collection was undertaken and thirty-one interviews and ten focus groups contributed to the analysis. This further phase of the research process served to explore in greater detail themes that emerged from the analysis of questionnaire data and provided insight into the experiences of SEN Teachers.

While roles and responsibilities vary between SENCOs internationally, research indicates that the role is difficult for many reasons (Abbott, 2007; Cole, 2005; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011; Oldham and Radford, 2011). Furthermore, the role has undergone transformation (Ekins, 2011) and continues to develop in a state of flux. While supporting and leading colleagues is identified as a responsibility (Cole, 2005; Rosen-Webb 2011), Garner (2001) insists that the enormity of the administrative burden on SENCOs prevents them from assuming more strategic leadership duties such as coaching and mentoring colleagues. This is particularly evident in Ireland and findings from the IFS, in concurrence with international literature describe a role that is complex, often isolating and one involving an overwhelming amount of administration (Cole, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2015; Layton, 2007; MacKenzie, 2007; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011). Table 2.2 illustrates the key responsibilities of SENCOs participating in the IFS phase of research. The role is often perceived as low status and operational in nature, rather than as a strategic position embedded firmly in the senior management structures of the school (Cole, 2005; Szwed, 2007).

Table 2.2: *Key roles and responsibilities of SENCOs in Irish post-primary schools*²

² Source: Fitzgerald, J. (2015). *Victims or Agents of Change: The SENCO role in post-primary schools in Ireland*. Unpublished EdD Institution Focused Study. London: UCL Institute of Education.

Roles & Responsibilities	
1	Liaison with principal on SEN issues
2	Liaison with National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)
3	Record keeping
4	Identification of students with SEN
5	Staff consultant on SEN issues
6	Applications for RACE (Reasonable Accommodations in Certified Exams)
7	Report Writing
8	Collaborating with other teachers
9	Liaison with parents
10	Timetabling of additional support
11	Whole-school leadership in SEN
12	Whole-school management and responsibility for SEN
13	Withdrawal of students for small group instruction
14	Implementation of school plan on SEN
15	Formulation of school plan on SEN
16	Withdrawal of students for individual instruction

The challenge in formulating a SENCO identity has been consistently discussed in international literature (Cowne, 2005; Mackenzie, 2007; Pearson and Ralph, 2007; Rosen-Webb, 2011). Ambiguity surrounding the role appears to prohibit the development of a solid SENCO identity (Pearson and Ralph, 2007). The theory of the Third Space as a domain characterised by *mixed teams of staff* who may not have a sense of belonging in any particular team resonates with a domain occupied by SENCOs (Whitchurch, 2008, p.386). Many are being called upon to create their own role and occupy a space that is unfamiliar to them and outside the boundaries of their knowledge, skills and expertise.

While Whitchurch (2008, p.377) describes the third space ‘as an emergent territory between academic and professional domains’, it is equally relevant to how the role of the SENCO is defined. SENCOs comprise a hybrid group of subject specialists with varying levels of

experience and qualifications relevant to special education, who work in a context loosely defined by policy. The Third Space is characterised by fluidity, flexibility, creativity and a merging of identities where the dynamics can be harnessed in a positive way to help members construct unique and creative professional profiles (Whitchurch, 2008). From this perspective, SENCOs can move from a position of isolation and uncertainty, to one which fosters positivity towards this fluidity, flexibility and uniqueness. However, such a response requires a conceptual shift in how the SENCO role is framed and a reorganisation of the environment in which they operate. This may be challenging.

2.2.2 Contextualising the SENCO Role: Challenges and Dilemmas

An exploration of the SENCO role contextualised by an inclusive special education approach illuminates how responsibility for specified groups of students cannot be seen to reside in one individual (Layton, 2005). In line with what Busher and Harris (2000) describe as the ‘diffuse’ nature of the role it follows that it is impossible for the SENCO to be singularly responsible for special education provision and therefore responsibilities must be distributed. Rather, the SENCO should become a figurehead or visionary providing leadership within the school (Blandford and Gibson, 2000; Cole, 2005; Norwich, 2010; Tissot, 2013). The necessity for developing systems within and between schools which promote inclusive special education to allow the SENCO act as a figurehead without being *burdened* with coordination of SEN for the entire school community emerged from the literature and my own research (Fitzgerald, 2015; Oldham and Radford, 2011). Developing the SENCO as a leader, working collaboratively alongside colleagues in their quest to deliver high quality, evidenced-based instruction to all students, including those requiring individualised approaches may engender more inclusive *special* practice at whole-school level (Dyson and Millward, 2000). That said, in this age of neo-liberal performativity (Barnett, 2008; Sachs, 2001) in a context characterised

by philosophies of marketisation, competition, centralisation and standards driven reform, is this a priority for schools?

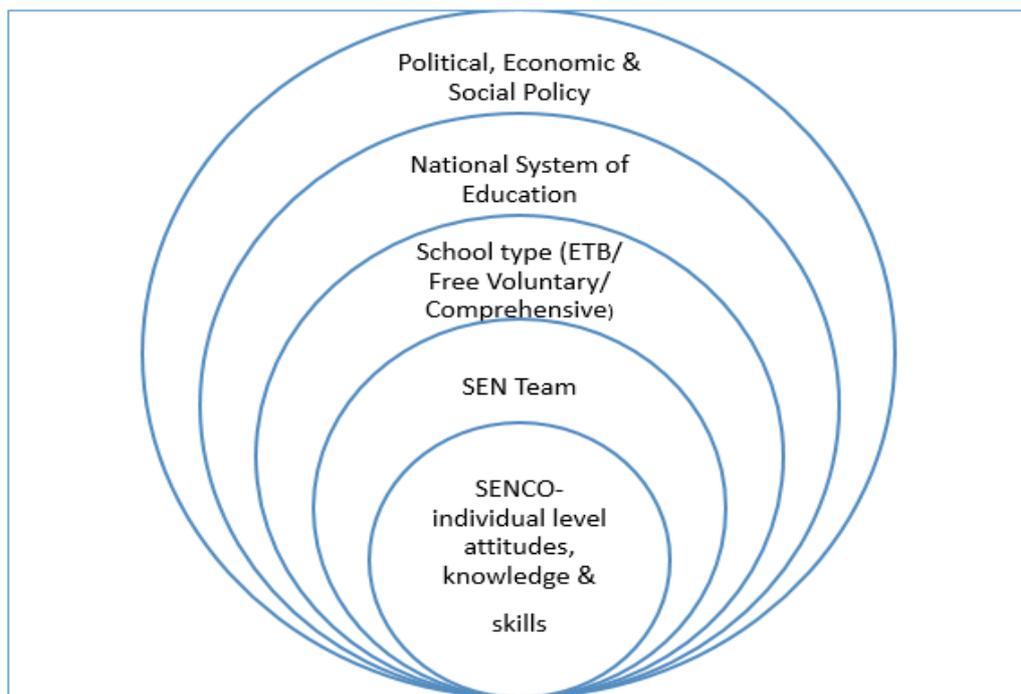
The performativity agenda is harmful on two accounts. Not only do negative drivers of educational change engender a culture of competition, compliance and fear amongst teachers (Fullan, 2011), they marginalise the most vulnerable students in a system which *entitles* students with SEN to access the same standards-based curricula as their typically developing peers. This often militates against those very same students, many of whom are perceived to be less productive in our education system (Hornby, 2015; Mitchell, 2009). Discourses within inclusive education address tensions deriving from these economics-driven agendas where teachers are being held publicly accountable for developing excellence in education and churning out individuals who can make meaningful contributions to the economy (Corbett, 2001; Dyson, 2009; McLaughlin and Jordan, 2005; Mitchell, 2009; Slee, 2009). This shift in focus to output driven reform is making *unproductive* students, many of whom may have SEN, unwelcome in schools (Dyson, 2009).

Furthermore, the impetus on standards driven reform, which seeks to improve academic output and performance for all students through high stakes testing, is holding schools to more rigorous levels of accountability (McLaughlin and Jordan, 2005). In a study conducted by Pearson et al (2015) previously mentioned, and which probed SENCOs insights into their changing role in a turbulent policy context, SENCOs regarded the constant generation and monitoring of student data in a performativity driven agenda as ‘more paperwork for less impact’ (Pearson et al, 2015, p.55). The immense time, energy and resources needed for data gathering to evidence ‘value added’ diverted efforts away from actual teaching and were not perceived as enhancing student outcomes. Consequently, the SENCO role has been devalued in this increasingly marketised system because SENCOs work with those same students

perceived negatively (Cole, 2005). In Ireland Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are not mandatory despite calls to fully reinstate EPSEN legislation (Rose et al, 2015). How can appropriate special education be provided when instruction is not individualised nor outcomes monitored and evaluated for some students (Douglas et al, 2012; Rose et al, 2012; Rose et al, 2015)? Furthermore, if SENCOs are reporting an onerous workload currently (Fitzgerald, 2015), how will mandatory identification, assessment, monitoring and evaluation of learning for students with SEN impact upon this? It seems a balance needs to be struck.

Finally, international research and my own experience as a SENCO, indicate that the role is multifaceted and complex (see for example Busher and Harris 2000; Cole 2005; Kearns 2006; O’Gorman and Drudy 2011). The research makes reference to various factors influencing SENCO role enactment (Cole, 2005; Ekins 2012; Kearns, 2005; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011; Oldham and Radford, 2011). Figure 2.2 illustrates these factors; essentially role enactment is influenced by a complex interplay between the SENCO, the organisation and the wider landscape (Forde et al, 2015) and which is woven together by the relationships sustaining it.

Figure 2.2: *The SENCO Organisational Context* (adapted from Forde et al, 2015)



In 2005 Cole argued that the SENCO role in the UK was still ‘under construction’ (2005, p.303). While much has happened since then, a solid conceptualisation of the role has yet to be constructed. In 2017 in Ireland, it has blindly evolved in various guises in mainstream post-primary schools (Fitzgerald, 2015) within an education system which does not formally recognise the position, and perhaps resists such formal recognition. In 2007, O’Gorman advised a move away from an expert model of SEN, where knowledge is seen to reside within a minority of well-trained individuals who advise and support colleagues (a *bolted on* role?), to a universal approach whereby expertise is developed within the school and empowers all teachers to respond to SEN issues. However, in 2011, O’Gorman and Drudy recommended that while a universal, whole-school approach should be adopted to enable inclusive special education for students with SEN, it is important that a SENCO be appointed at management level to coordinate and lead a whole-school approach. Findings from the IFS concur (Fitzgerald, 2015). Yet, despite calls to elevate SENCOs to management teams in schools, a tension exists between the role and an approach to inclusive education that supports a universal

response.

2.2.3 Is there a need for the SENCO role?

If inclusive education is to be the responsibility of all, is there a need for the SENCO? In essence, isn't an effective SENCO one who works themselves out of a job? Are SENCOs, by virtue of the position, perpetuating a dual system of special and mainstream education? Findings from the IFS indicate that withdrawal for esoteric SEN instruction is the predominant model of support (Fitzgerald, 2015), perhaps providing an opt out for subject teachers or indeed disempowerment based on the assumption that students require specialised teaching, of which they are unable to provide. Equally, it could be an acknowledgement of the individualised complex needs of some students with SEN, whom require specialist approaches along a continuum of provision. Either way, an over-reliance on withdrawal models of support could be facilitative of a two-track system.

In a system that supports inclusive special education, findings from the IFS suggest the growing importance of SENCOs in leading and managing collaborative problem-solving approaches to provision (Fitzgerald, 2015). Developing the SENCO as a leader of learning and change or as a *Collaborator* (Kearns, 2005), working alongside colleagues within schools may inspire more inclusive practice (Dyson and Millward, 2000), while simultaneously acknowledging the need for more individualised approaches for some students. As a way forward for SENCOs it would mean letting go of individualism (isolation?) and embracing the creative and innovative dynamism generated through collaboration in a shared (third?) space. Maybe development of the SENCO as leader, mentor and collaborator could provide the much needed support for students and staff while at the same time moving away from the idea of SENCO as *Expert* or *Rescue* (Kearns, 2005), entrenched only in work with individual students and embedded in

deficit views of student dis/ability. This repositioning of the role would have implications for the professional learning needs of SENCOs -from CPD embedded in deficit, pathological views of SEN to CPD that develops skills and knowledge required by SENCOs acting in consultancy and management roles within their schools to build and lead a continuum of provision (O’Gorman et al, 2009). However, developing a dual role for SENCOs as both strategic collaborators and SEN specialists within a system that promotes placement in mainstream classes insofar as possible, while simultaneously acknowledging the necessity for *expert knowledge* to teach students with more complex needs, is a balancing act and could prove challenging for SENCOs.

The next section will explore leadership approaches to inclusive special education.

2.3 Leadership and the SENCO Role

Definitions of the SENCO role refer to it as having both leadership and management elements and in the UK, a move towards developing the SENCO as leader is underway. For SENCOs to lead the SEN agenda a vision for and interest in inclusion is important. While various leadership models occupy the discourse, this thesis is concerned with transformational approaches to leading and managing change. Transformational leaders, explain Bass and Riggio (2006):

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

(Bass and Riggio, 2006, p.3)

Within a learning organisation underpinned by an inclusive special education approach, transformational leadership provides a best fit model in achieving sustainable growth and

change (Bass and Riggio, 2006).

Contemporary educational policy in Ireland demands whole-school collaborative approaches to interpreting and implementing policy. Transformational leadership models are underpinned by collective and collaborative approaches to decision-making and policy implementation and are therefore important to Principal and SENCO roles alike. Leadership from this perspective is developed around relationships with colleagues and involves an understanding of the contexts, shared goals and decision-making processes essential to the learning organisation (Fullan, 2001).

Developing the SENCO as a collaborative leader may be challenging in the Irish context when a culture of individualism exists within the organisation. Findings from the IFS indicated that more than half of participating SENCOs (14 out of 27) did not have a management position and fulfilled the role in their *spare time* (Fitzgerald, 2015). International literature consistently argues that if SENCOs are to influence whole-school policy and practice in inclusive special education at all school levels they need to be strategically placed within the school management structure (Cole, 2005; Layton, 2005; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011; Tissot, 2013). Recommendations made in the IFS support this view. Participating SENCOs fulfilled primarily operational roles and lacked position and status to effect change at a whole-school level (Fitzgerald, 2015). Then again, Hallett and Hallett (2010) insist that membership of the management team is not a panacea to enhancing the status of SENCOs or influencing their capacity to lead change. So what is then? Linked to an evolving leadership role is the notion that SENCOs need to develop what Tangen (2005, p.68), in his Norwegian study called a *change competence*. Using a survey approach with almost 3000 post-primary teachers and administrators, his study sought to evaluate a national school-based teacher education programme aimed at developing teachers’ competence to teach students with SEN in inclusive

settings. It concluded that while a philosophy of inclusion and disability-specific information is necessary, it is not enough. He insists that ‘teachers should also be competent (and willing) to serve as change agents and to participate in and lead development work as a regular part of their role’ (Tangen, 2005, p.68).

What seems to be emerging from the literature is what Oldham and Radford identify as ‘divergent forcesoperating on the relevance of leadership to the SENCO role and placing it in tension’ (Oldham and Radford, 2011, p.127). In their research on the SENCO leadership role and its relevance, Oldham and Radford (2011) contend that a tension exists between a rights based agenda to ensure that provision for students with SEN is a universal responsibility and the continued need for what they call a *champion* of special education. They suggest an alternative that might reduce some of the tension; if SENCOs’ leadership role is limited to the daily management of the SEN team then universal, whole-school influence is not facilitated. However, if leadership of SEN becomes the remit of the Principal, it elevates its status to senior management and it becomes a universal issue. Senior teachers, including Principals, would need to be well-informed about special education. While in-depth, the study only sought perspectives of SENCOs on leadership of SEN. If, as the study recommends, SEN is to become a universal issue with the Principal at the helm an exploration of Principals’ views to this end would have been worthwhile. However, while the study assumes that a policy move towards a universal approach to SEN will (could?) diminish the need for the SEN ‘champion’ or advocate, others dispute this. Tissot (2013) insists that advocacy continues to feature strongly and is also a key motivator for undertaking the SENCO role. She conducted an empirical mixed-methods study with SENCOs undertaking the NASENCO qualification and sought to gauge SENCOs perspectives on their role, specifically leadership elements of the role, through questionnaires and interviews. The NASENCO Award places emphasis on the strategic leadership nature of the role and Tissot argues that any separation of the strategic role from the

daily operational work is ‘not an effective blueprint for promoting and prioritising the needs of vulnerable students’ (Tissot, 2013, p. 37).

International research (Arnaiz and Castejon, 2001; Hausstätter and Takala, 2008) suggests that if provision for students with SEN is understood to be shared amongst the entire school community, the SENCO ceases to be the champion for these students and becomes a support for colleagues within the school. The role of the SENCO, within this context, moves away from a focus on the student with SEN and is directed towards the development of a curricular model that supports access to learning for all students from a whole-school perspective. While a questionnaire approach was employed in the study, the sample was relatively small (136 SEN Teachers) and collected information from primary SEN Teachers only. External validity may be limited but nevertheless certain findings are relatable to all SEN Teachers across contexts, particularly in relation to SENCOs as advisers for colleagues. This links closely to Kearns’ (2005) SENCO as *Collaborator* operating within a learning organisation, collectively and collaboratively responding to challenges. This discernible shift in focus is evident in Irish policy (DES, 2007; NCSE, 2014) where a universal approach is advocated and where the SENCO is encouraged to act strategically as a consultant for the entire school community. However, is this happening in practice? Perhaps more importantly, are systems in place to develop the SENCO role in such a capacity? One would have to question such policy, particularly when the SENCO role is not formally recognised.

The development of systems promoting inclusive education is imperative to allow the SENCO to act as a figurehead without being burdened with administration and coordination of SEN for the entire school community (Oldham and Radford, 2011). Unlike other subject coordinators, SENCOs are required to work alongside colleagues while also trying to *influence* staff attitudes and practice (Busher and Harris, 2000), many of whom conceptualise inclusive and special

education differently (Dyson, 1993). The word *influence* is significant. How can SENCOs positively influence the attitudes, values and practices of colleagues? The development of 'learning organisations' (Senge, 1990) and systems promoting collaborative practice provide an analytic for SENCO role enactment, where, not unlike Arnaiz and Castejons' (2001) and Tangen's (2005) assertions, capacity to influence change is identified as a core skill and is dependent on the connections within and between social networks or communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Again, the complexity of the SENCO role is compounded by its relational nature.

Surprisingly (or perhaps not!), what is absent from Irish policy is any impetus to formally recognise the SENCO role and align it to the management structures within the school. Does policy consciously resist such a move, and if so why? In practice the role exists and has developed despite its lack of formal recognition (Fitzgerald, 2015). Therefore one must question current policy and its rationale for (possibly?) resisting moves to formally recognise the SENCO role. Equally absent is recognition of the time and resourcing required to undertake the role. Furthermore, the DES (2007) recommends that the coordinating teacher holds a postgraduate qualification in special education, but to date no such qualification is necessary. What message does this imply about special education as a *profession*? Is it a profession? In a keynote address at the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) Annual Conference, Dr. Patricia Daly, Mary Immaculate College Limerick, called for greater capacity building at school level to promote a system-wide response to inclusive and special education. Such capacity building would involve a reconceptualisation of SEN Teachers. She insists that special education needs to be recognised as a 'profession' in Ireland by both the DES and the Teaching Council. Her impetus to professionalise special education is strengthened by the assertion that special education:

- is a discipline;
- uses theory to inform practice;
- is underpinned by a significant body of research; and
- requires both knowledge and pedagogical knowledge about special education.

(Daly, 2016)

Furthermore, she makes the case for mandatory postgraduate professional learning for SEN Teachers, as this ‘will build schools’ capacity to work better with NEPS’ (Daly, 2016, Slide 13).

Contradictions within the literature exist. Internationally a move away from the expert model is underway (Ekins, 2013; Florian and Linklater, 2009) towards the development of SEN leaders who facilitate whole-school approaches to inclusive practice. Yet, others (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006; Hornby, 2015; Kaufman and Badar, 2014) make the distinction between *special* and *inclusive* education. SEN Teachers, they insist, need appropriate *specialist* qualifications in order to meet the more complex needs of some students along a continuum of provision which is strategically coordinated and led by equally qualified specialists in SEN. Both approaches have implications for the focus of professional development for SENCOs, and moreover, for all staff.

2.3.1 The SENCO Role: Is Status Synonymous with Leadership?

The status attributed to the SENCO within the school context is determined by how the role is interpreted in schools (Mackenzie, 2007). Szwed (2007) advocates for the development of a formal positional leadership role for SENCOs and asserts that where strong leadership is absent, SENCOs spend substantial time fulfilling roles that are largely operational. SENCOs

in positional leadership roles can provide greater direction for staff as it can strengthen the SENCO voice when providing guidance (Cole, 2005). Moves towards ‘flattened’ (Forde et al, 2015) leadership structures in schools, in the form of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) now permeate learning organisations, particularly at post-primary level. Leadership in this sense is not only associated with *positional* roles and linked to line management or administration, it is *relational*, and is seen as a collective task of supporting, developing and enhancing the learning organisation. In essence, professional growth and learning of *individual* teachers and their capacity to evolve, adapt and change within the organisation recognises the importance of relationships (Netolicky, 2016). Transformational leadership, described earlier, fosters the development of relationships. Professional learning becomes a ‘situated social practice and a collective process profoundly influenced by environment...personal and professional networks’ (Netolicky, 2016, p. 280).

However, notwithstanding the relational leadership potential for SENCOs, how special education is interpreted in schools can almost be inferred from the status bestowed upon the SENCO (Mackenzie, 2007; Oldham and Radford, 2011). When SENCOs are part of the school management team, higher status is likely to amass (O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011), yet in Ireland, many do not hold formal leadership roles (Fitzgerald, 2015). Does this prevent them from embracing leadership roles? While SENCOs might be empowered to take a more proactive role in promoting inclusive practice due to acquiring positional leadership roles (Rosen-Webb, 2011), if the school organisation does not facilitate collaborative and collective approaches to respond to student diversity, membership of the leadership team may not necessarily support SENCOs in leading change initiatives.

Furthermore, while elevating the SENCO role to the school leadership team can promote the importance attributed to it and special education generally, Hallett and Hallett (2010),

discussed earlier, insist it is not a cure-all. The complexity of the SENCO role is directly linked to the complexity of individuals operating within dynamic learning organisations with no *standard programme* (Skrtic, 1991). In Hong Kong for example, policy assigns the SENCO role to level of Deputy Principal (Education Bureau 2011 in Fong Poon-McBrayer, 2012). However, in her qualitative study involving interviews with four primary and two post-primary SENCOs, Fong Poon-McBrayer (2012) found that schools chose to ignore policy guidance and did not appoint SENCOs as Deputy Principals. Furthermore, she reported that SENCOs (even in Deputy Principal roles) fulfilled largely operational duties and had limited influence due to the top-down, autocratic models of leadership prevalent in Hong Kong. Here centralised decision-making processes dominate school cultures, hindering attempts at collaborative, democratic approaches to leading inclusive and special education. Nevertheless, the statutory inclusion of the SENCO to the senior management team in the school would facilitate a more universal leadership role and a status that implies the importance of special education (Oldham and Radford, 2011).

For Pearson (2010) the issue in defining the SENCO leadership role is directly linked to the specialist knowledge and skills required to successfully fulfil the role (Pearson, 2010).

Similarly, for Rosen-Webb (2011);

‘there is a significant reservoir of power available to those who possess appropriate professional expertise...status awarded to the SENCO, as a measure of power, may indicate how the SENCO is valued in terms of what Bush (2008) calls “authority of expertise”’.

(Rosen-Webb, 2011, p.160).

If acquiring a level of expertise in the field partly determines status then this has significant implications for SENCO status in Ireland. While there is an expectation that the SENCO will have a sound understanding of issues related to special education (DES, 2007), this is not

compulsory and therefore practice varies. However, does specialist knowledge and expertise alone enhance status and facilitate leadership in SEN?

In Ireland, the only position in post-primary schools requiring a specialist postgraduate qualification is the role of the Guidance Counsellor which involves engaging in personal, educational, and vocational counselling with students throughout their post-primary education. They support students to identify suitable career pathways, but also play a role in supporting student wellbeing. They are represented by a national professional organisation and have formal structures in place to facilitate regional networking on a regular basis. Until 2011, Guidance Counsellors did not engage in curricular teaching. Recessionary cutbacks, and the removal of guidance as an 'ex-quota' position in schools, forced many Guidance Counsellors back into teaching, which reduced the time spent providing guidance. Following significant pressure from the Institute of Guidance Counsellors and school management bodies, guidance counselling was partially restored in the October 2015 Budget (Institute of Guidance Counsellors, 2016) and is set for full restoration in September 2017 (Minister for Education and Skills, 2017). Surely this signifies the importance of the role or to put it another way, the *profession* of Guidance Counselling? Furthermore, formal recognition of this role has also enabled the development of formal support structures.

No such mandated professional development specific to the needs of SENCOs exists in Ireland. Does this therefore call the professionalism with which the role is enacted into question and by default, the status attributed to it? As previously mentioned, 'the creation of the special educator as a professional or "expert" is still under construction', (Cole, 2005, p.303). Compounding factors in delaying the construction of SENCO identity as expert according to Vogt (2002), is a greater demand for pedagogical skill in tandem with subject knowledge. But what subject knowledge is relevant? Is it specific knowledge about disabilities? Or is it

knowledge of wider systems and structures promoting inclusive practice and fostering participatory approaches to including students with SEN? Or is it both? Professional learning communities (PLCs) provide a conduit for developing and supporting SENCO learning and building capacity to respond to student diversity at school level.

2.3.2 Schools as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

In education, the organisational environment for teachers is complex, dynamic and multifaceted (Forde et al, 2015). Inclusive special education is evident in schools which are flexibly responsive to the needs of its students, and are willing to adapt to meet these needs (Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Mittler, 2000; Norwich, 2012). School improvement is linked to a school's collective capacity to respond to change (Senge, 1990). A reconfiguration of school organisations as *adhocracies* (Bennis and Slater, 1964; Skrtic, 1991), *communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) or *learning organisations* (Senge, 1990) is required. Learning organisations can be described as:

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

(Senge, 1990, p.3)

Adhocracies-another form of learning organisations-are problem-solving organisations which are flexibly responsive and can:

‘invent new practices and procedures for doing work that is so ambiguous...no one can be sure exactly what needs to be done...knowledge develops as the work unfolds...success of the undertaking depends primarily on the ability of the [team] to adapt to each other along their uncharted route.’

(Skrtic et al, 1996 p.145)

The same might be said for teachers operating in environments characterised by diversity and change. Teamwork, collaborative practice, and flexible and fluid responses to the coordination of practice are required within a *community of practice* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) to create effective learning organisations (Senge, 1990). The power of situated, school-based learning is well documented in the literature (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Senge, 1998; Netolicky, 2016; Sugrue, 2002). Using the concept of *situated learning* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) the philosophy of inclusion can facilitate opportunities for all members of the school community to learn and flexibly respond within the community, which may be *legitimately peripheral* initially, but which become more involved and meaningful over time (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Facilitating teacher participation in collaborative decision-making processes may stimulate individual and personal ownership in relation to school improvement (Ainscow and Sandill, 2011). The creation of *social learning processes* (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010), collaborative spaces for colleagues to meet, share, problem-solve and problem-pose towards a collective goal will, it is suggested, bring about change to inclusive *cultures*, which in turn affect inclusive *practices*. In this way, the actions of individuals can be influenced, but moreover, the ‘thinking that informs these actions’ (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010, p.403). Social learning processes may be promoted if schools develop organisational structures (adhocracies/learning organisations) that ‘stimulate and support processes of interrogation and reflection’, (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010, p.405). Moreover, *adhocracy* insists that students’ inability to achieve success should be viewed as an indicator of the necessity for reform (Skrtic, 1991). Collaborative (third?) spaces which facilitate situated learning, collective interrogation and reflection are perhaps better placed to recognise the need for such reform.

A reconfiguration of the learning organisation to enable the development of: distributed models of leadership; high levels of staff and student engagement; collaborative planning; a

commitment to continual professional learning and reflective practice are essential to the advancement of collaborative practice and problem-solving (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Carroll, 2008; Hargreaves et al, 2007) and ultimately inclusive special education. However, achieving balance between collaborative practice and teachers' individuality can prove challenging (Stoll and Fink, 1996) but strong leadership can promote equilibrium when teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of the learning organisation and culture are aligned (Sachs, 2001).

Capacity building within schools as learning organisations recognises that facilitation and provision of professional development to teaching and other staff is 'a critical factor to ensure consistency of inclusive practice' (Shevlin et al, 2013, p.24). Moreover, the role of the teacher is perhaps the single most critical factor in the establishment of such environments (EADSNE, 2012; Hattie, 2009; Rose et al, 2015). While professional learning is a highly individualised endeavour (Netolicky, 2016), best practice models are those identified as 'collaborative and grounded, rather than individual or top-down' (Netolicky, 2016, p.271). The relationship between the individual teacher and the school is critical for professional learning and

'as professional capital is about individual and collective knowing and doing over time, professional learning works best when it addresses and honors parts and whole, person and group....and is supported and resourced by schools.'

(Netolicky, 2016, p. 271)

Strong leadership from the Principal is important in facilitating collaborative and collegial practice based on trust and respect (Bottery, 2006; Sachs, 2001), where members of the learning organisation are equally respected and encouraged to share expertise and take risks (Stoll and Fink, 1996). Transformational leadership approaches provide a best fit and the Principal's role as transformational leader is now being reconstituted as role model, facilitator, and supporter of whole-school change efforts, in contrast to the more autocratic approaches of the

transactional leader (Bottery, 2006).

However, creating cultures of trust and collaboration can be difficult (Bolam et al, 2005). In Ireland, there is a long tradition of teaching being something that happens by individual teachers in individual classrooms without intrusion from the outside (Drudy, 2001). We need to move beyond this, insist Furlong et. al (2000) who claim that the era of individualism, isolation and autonomy to make decisions about pedagogy and the curriculum has passed. But what needs to be in place to facilitate collaborative learning and foster trust?

In developing collaborative approaches to inclusive special education, SENCOs and colleagues need to be learning together in *learning-rich* rather than *learning-impooverished* schools (Barth, 2001). The SENCO in a learning-rich organisation collaborates with colleagues in relation to CPD needs (SENCO as Collaborator), moving away from operational tasks (SENCO as Auditor) and individual work with students (SENCO as Rescue or Expert) and involves *active participation* by all members of the organisation (Cordingley, 2014). A focus on developing a learning organisation which creates; structures to disseminate information about students with SEN; opportunities to cascade CPD relevant to SEN; SEN teams; time at whole-school meetings for discussion of SEN issues collectively induce whole-school mediated change. Facilitating collaborative practice between colleagues is essential and preferential to individual teachers working in isolation with individual students (Norwich, 2010; Senge, 1998). Principals need to attend to three broad tasks in their efforts to develop learning-rich inclusive schools, insists Riehl (2000). They need to:

1. promote new meanings about difference and diversity embedded in social models;
2. facilitate and encourage inclusive practice; and
3. develop communities of practice within the school and with the wider community.

A whole-school collaborative approach to inclusive special education, where the SENCO is firmly positioned at the helm to guide, mentor and support colleagues in their endeavours to engage all students could enhance inclusive practice and develop pedagogical skills of all practitioners (Kugelmass, 2003). Similarly, Dyson (1993) argues for the development of what he calls *Effective Learning Coordinators* as an alternative to SENCOs. The focus here would be on the development of inclusive pedagogies and interventions, whereby effectiveness is underpinned by a strong research base, to promote access to and engagement with learning for all students. This would empower SENCOs to develop roles that were not *bolted on* (Norwich, 2010) or seen as additional. In this way, inclusion becomes located in the broader issues of the curriculum and teaching and learning. Nonetheless, while policy decrees that the responsibility for including students with SEN lies with the entire educational community (DES, 2007; NCSE, 2014), recognising the importance of meaningful collaboration to respond as a collective community is a challenge, as is equipping teachers with the necessary pedagogical skills to engage students with SEN (Fitzgerald, 2015). However, developing whole-school capacity to respond to students with common needs might create much sought after *time* for *expert* SEN Teachers and SENCOs to provide more specialist intervention to students with significant and complex needs along a continuum of provision.

While the inclusive special education approach recognises the need for specialised instruction for a minority of students (Hornby, 2015), this needs to be carefully managed and provided within a continuum of provision advocating classroom based learning in the first instance, with pedagogic support from school-based specialists within the community of practice. In this way, it may soften the boundaries between a dual system to one which allows for flexible and fluid movement along the continuum. Developing systems which foster collaboration within the community of practice is therefore imperative to support a collective and flexible response (Oldham and Radford, 2011) and would involve a repositioning of the SENCO from an

isolated, marginalised role to a position within the distributed leadership structures of the learning organisation. The impact of Principal leadership on facilitating this repositioning and on cultivating collaborative cultures to promote and sustain change is profound (Fullan, 2005).

2.3.3 School Leadership in Turbulent times

An organisation's readiness to embrace change is influenced by the nature and quality of leadership (NCCA, 2010). While this study is not concerned with Principal leadership in its entirety it is interested in exploring the impact of Principal leadership on nurturing inclusive cultures and enabling SENCOs' capacity to lead and manage change initiatives relatable to inclusive special education.

Ireland, not unlike other jurisdictions, continues to suffer *repetitive change syndrome* (Abrahamson, 2004) where schools are subjected to initiative overload (for example, Junior Cycle reform, literacy and numeracy initiatives, changes to SEN resource allocation model) and consequent *change-related chaos* (Abrahamson, 2004). Deep change requires significant emotional investment and can be painful (Hargreaves, 2004). The importance attributed to the Principal in promoting inclusive educational practice emerged as a dominant theme in the IFS. Participating SENCOs reported strong leadership and support from their Principals. Principals and senior management are strategically placed to influence the development of a collaborative learning organisation infused with an inclusive ethos and culture but moreover, have the power and a certain degree of control over resources to actualise this (Cowne, 2005; O'Gorman and Drudy, 2011; Oldham and Radford, 2011; Senge, 1990). Support from senior management is imperative to the effective coordination of special education provision, insists Cowne (2005). Findings from her extensive mixed-methods study with both primary and post-primary SENCOs participating in postgraduate training, identified that when SENCOs had adequate

non-contact time and status, they felt effective in their roles. Cowne collected data through questionnaires from SENCOs participating in training over a three year period about their current and emerging roles. In addition she conducted focus group interviews with SENCOs and individual interviews with Local Education Authority (LEA) officers in an attempt to explore system-wide levels of support for SEN coordination and SENCOs. She found that LEA levels of support for SENCOs was evident in their commitment to facilitating professional learning opportunities and establishing SENCO Fora. The importance of adequate time and support to fulfil the role is also acknowledged in Irish research and concerns have been expressed as to the effectiveness of the role in a system that is 'overburdened to the extent of being ineffective' (ACCS, 2008 in O'Gorman and Drudy, 2011, p. 173). However, unlike SENCOs participating in Cowne's study, Irish SENCOs have no such system-wide levels of support.

Models of leadership in post-primary schools tend to be distributed (Gronn, 2009), as Principals have moved from individualistic approaches to ones where leadership is shared across a leadership team (Oldham and Radford, 2011). Leadership of special education in Ireland is generally devolved to a SEN Teacher or team (O'Gorman and Drudy, 2011). Transformational approaches to leadership foster teacher engagement and commitment to the change process and are more likely to reduce teacher's pain and anxiety (Hargreaves, 2004) and result in deep change (Fullan, 1993). Similarly, a reconceptualisation of the interplay between leadership and learning, and how this might lead to leadership for learning within the learning organisation is required to engage leaders in collaborative efforts to bring about change and not simply to enforce *street level bureaucracy* (Lipsky, 1980) -responding to policy and legislative initiatives in a top-down manner (Hallett and Hallett, 2010, p.54). The key principle maintains that learning is for everybody, it is a complex activity which is dynamically linked to leadership in an ongoing cycle of action, participation, reflection and collective and collaborative practice

(Swaffield and Macbeath, 2009). If a culture of learning and continuous professional growth is cultivated by school leaders, it becomes embedded in school practice and facilitates a flexible, whole-school response to student diversity.

In the IFS a metaphor to describe the role of Principals as horticulturalist was used. Inclusive Principals nurture professional growth and development of all staff by engendering openness to new learning and enquiry (Fitzgerald, 2015). These *constant gardeners* need to plant seeds to grow inclusive curricular programmes and to challenge long-held belief systems, to water those seeds that empower staff to take greater action, to nourish roots extending into the wider community by inviting parental and community involvement, and finally to alter the flow of resources to better encourage growth. In this way, growth can be maximised by Principals. However, cultivating transformational leadership is founded on the premise of mutual trust (Fullan, 2005). In a performativity driven climate this can prove challenging for Principals, as the balance of power must shift from leaders to teachers, and hierarchies flatten (Forde et al, 2015). It requires Principals to trust in their teachers' values and beliefs but in reality, Principals are seen as gatekeepers of accountability, thus compromising this relationship (King, 2012).

2.4 Conclusion

It is apparent from the review of the literature that tensions and dilemmas exist in attempting to describe the development of the SENCO role in an education system that has been profoundly transformed in a relatively short time. No discussion of the role of the SENCO within the national context would be complete without contextualising it within the broader international arena of inclusive education. The literature describes a role that is complex, often isolating (but yet relational) and one which involves an overwhelming amount of administration (Cole, 2005; Layton, 2007; O'Gorman and Drudy, 2011; Pearson and Ralph,

2007). Much of the literature explores how the role has developed within the context of accelerated policy reform. Moreover, the evolving discourses on inclusive and special education and more recently *inclusive special education* (Hornby, 2015) have created ambiguity in relation to role interpretation.

Various authors (Dyson, 2009; Florian, 1998; Hornby, 2015; Winter and Raw, 2010) discuss the challenges in defining inclusive education and the implications this has to recognising it in local settings. Others offer insights into how SENCOs have responded to developments in inclusive and special education (Kearns, 2005; Pearson, 2010; Rosen-Webb, 2011). The literature exposes the challenges facing SENCOs. Conflicting demands on SENCO time (Cole, 2005; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011; Szwed, 2007) often result in SENCOs fulfilling roles that are largely operational, despite some policy recognition of the need for the strategic development of visionaries who can lead a whole-school SEN agenda. Ambiguity as to the status of the SENCO emerged as a key theme (Cole, 2005; Norwich, 2010; Oldham and Radford, 2011; Rosen-Webb, 2011) and maintained that status is almost inferred in relation to whether the SENCO holds a POR or not. The concept of leadership was also closely connected to status and discussion focused on SENCOs’ capacity to lead learning in schools which are *learning-impooverished* or *learning-rich* (Barth, 2001). Ultimately, the centrality of relationships and the creation of schools as learning organisations (Senge, 1991) or communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) are considered imperative to effective professional learning and capacity to respond to student diversity (Hallett and Hallett, 2010; Norwich, 2010; Swaffield and Macbeath, 2009).

The challenge in formulating a SENCO identity was consistently discussed in the literature (Cowne, 2005; Mackenzie, 2007; Pearson and Ralph, 2007; Rosen-Webb, 2011). Kearns (2005) describes the SENCO as Collaborator, emphasising the relational aspect of the role. A

theory borrowed from Whitchurch (2008) was used to locate the SENCO in the Third Space, a place occupied by a hybrid group of teachers with no clear sense of identity. Development of the SENCO role from this perspective embeds itself firmly in curricular and pedagogical issues.

Finally, while much literature exists internationally, further research is needed that explores the experiences of SENCOs working in post-primary schools in Ireland. Research in this area is timely as the education system enters another stage of transformation with the imminent introduction of a revised model of resource allocation to schools (DES Circular 0014/2017; NCSE, 2014).

Chapter Three will present the research questions emanating from the review of the literature and discuss the methodology chosen to undertake the research and approaches to data-collection and analysis. The sampling strategy adopted for the study will also be justified and brief profiles of participants and their contexts will be presented. Issues relating to the quality of the research and researcher positionality will be discussed. Ethical procedures will also be addressed.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

'Different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world.'

(Crotty, 1998, p.66)

3.0 Introduction

This study employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to extend and deepen my understanding of the complex interdependent and inter-connected web of variables impacting upon SENCO role enactment. The views of six SENCOs and their Principals were collected in relation to leadership and management of special education provision in their schools. This chapter outlines the approach adopted for the study and the rationale for its selection. It debates the philosophical underpinnings of the research and the positionality of the researcher within an interpretivist paradigm. Data-collection procedures and components of data analyses will be outlined followed by a critical discussion of issues pertinent to the quality of the research. It concludes with a discussion of relevant ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Aims and Questions

This research contributes to the knowledge base relating to inclusive leadership and the SENCO role in post-primary schools in Ireland. In selecting the research design, I was guided firstly by what I aimed to achieve and secondly by the research questions (Crotty, 1998; Silverman, 2011) which were derived from the literature, findings from the IFS and my own professional experience. Table 3.1 outlines the research aims and questions which were addressed in the study.

Table 3.1: *Research Aims and Questions*

Research Aims
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• to explore the identities SENCOs developed in fulfilling this role;

- to explore factors that impacted upon SENCO role enactment, both at school and national level;
- to explore the relationship between SENCOs and their Principals in an attempt to understanding the impact (if any) this had on SENCO role execution; and
- to use findings to potentially inform policy and further identify systems and processes required to advance the SENCO role in Ireland.

Research Questions

1. In the context of mainstream post-primary schools, how do SENCOs and their Principals conceptualise the SENCO role?
2. What barriers and facilitators influence SENCOs and Principals in leading and managing provision for learners with SEN?
3. How do SENCOs and their Principals implement change and support colleagues to develop inclusive practice?

The literature and findings from the IFS highlighted the importance of leadership in developing whole-school approaches to SEN coordination and provision for students with SEN. Empirical studies relevant to the SENCO role outlined in Chapter Two revealed research gaps. The importance of the Principal and senior management teams in prioritising SEN and elevating the status attributed to it is well documented in studies but perspectives of Principals were not gleaned in any included studies. This study sought to explore the factors influencing SENCO role enactment from both SENCO and Principal perspectives and probed the relationship between both. The literature also drew attention to the need to develop schools as learning

organisations which engender collaborative and collective responses to inclusive special education and increase schools' capacities to respond to change. Hence this research examined factors that supported SENCO role enactment and focused on how schools could stimulate collaborative *cultures* and embed whole-school collaborative and collective *practices* in attempts to support SENCOs in their efforts to lead change or share in the leadership of SEN alongside their Principals.

3.2 Philosophical Perspective and Authorial Stance

This research is based on specific epistemological and ontological assumptions about the production, interpretation and reportage of data. My interest in this study developed from my experience as a SENCO and as a lecturer in inclusive and special education. People cannot write from nowhere (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002) and my background and experiences have inevitably influenced my approach to research. The research process and data are never value-neutral (Eisenhart, 2006). Reflexivity is central to this study and involves making explicit my position as a researcher, a teacher educator and a practitioner (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). Researchers interpret and represent data in various ways. The process of interpretation is itself a balancing act, requiring not only an awareness of the relationship between the researcher and the research but also vigilance against distortion or misinterpretation of data.

Epistemological questions about the constitution of knowledge (Crotty, 1998) and ontological questions about the nature of reality (Robson, 2011) remained in the foreground throughout the research process. The interpretive constitution of knowledge, which this study ascribes to, situates me the researcher *within* the research and therefore an acknowledgement of the 'I' in the study is imperative (Lincoln and Guba, 2000).

‘Values, like politics, are ever present and will impact on the research process. Rather than deny their existence, prudent researchers will attempt to understand and make explicit, their personal values while at the same time, seek to understand the values held by people, organisations or cultures being researched.’

(Anderson, 1998, p.33)

While research paradigms continue to evolve, each representing sometimes polar views about the constitution of knowledge, two principle paradigms tend to underpin research in the social sciences. A positivist approach, closely linked to objectivism (Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006) is embedded in quantitative, scientific, observable methods, where the observer is separate from the subjects of observation (Cohen et al, 2011). A key component of positivism is its capacity for generalisation (Morrison, 2002). The interpretive paradigm, conversely, insists that multiple constructions of reality exist and rejects claims related to absolute truths prevailing regardless of individuals (Bassegy, 1995). Furthermore, interpretivists embrace the concept of subjectivity and contend that time-and context-free generalisations are neither possible nor desired. Instead, interpretive research contributes to existing knowledge which may provide new insights in similar contexts. The research is value-laden and the *researcher* and the *researched* are allied.

A positivist approach to this study was rejected, firstly because of my epistemological and ontological assumptions about the production and reality of knowledge but moreover, because ‘teaching [is] a complex intellectual endeavour that unfolds in an equally complex sociocultural context’ (Borko et al, 2007, p. 4). It is relational and interactional. This research focused on SENCOs’ and Principals’ perceptions of leadership in inclusive special education. It was decidedly personal and subjective. Furthermore, as the researcher in this study, I was interlocked with the *researched* in an interactive process, whereby ontologically, the research aimed to understand the complexities of leading inclusive special education. I sought to capture variations in practice through detailed descriptions in local contexts and through consistent

interpretations of how the participants made sense of their worlds. This lends itself primarily to subjective interpretive approaches to research and qualitative data-collection methods, which seek *particularity* over *generalisability* (Erickson, 1986).

My epistemological stance has its origins in the work of Dewey (Dewey, 1916; 1938), who exemplified the significance of qualitative approaches in the social sciences. From a Deweyan perspective, educational endeavours and practices are democratically led within democratic learning environments. My years as an educational practitioner-as a teacher, SENCO and teacher educator-working in diverse settings, marries well with Dewey's notion of democracy wherein individuals were valued for their contributions in a democratic environment. These experiences influenced my approach to teaching and also my approach to this research. Thus, in conducting this study, I recognise that knowledge and truth claims being made stem from a commitment to teaching and learning as a collaborative practice undertaken alongside colleagues, and directed by democratic standards and principles. Viewed from this epistemological standpoint, knowledge and meaning are subjective and personal and are derived from 'our engagement with the realities in our world' (Crotty, 1998 p.8). They are therefore *constructed*.

Interpretivist research cannot attest to objective rigours of positivist approaches but any test of validity to be applied to knowledge claims derived from me the researcher, SENCOs and their Principals in this study are those of critical self-reflection, an openness to criticism from other perspectives within a pluralist democracy and which are underpinned by values of dignity, respect, and equality for human beings. In practical terms, it equates to the commitment of me as a researcher and the research participants as *coal face* practitioners attempting to advance inclusive educational practices by seeking fresh insights, which are open to interrogation and critique, and which ultimately are likely to improve the experiences of all members of the

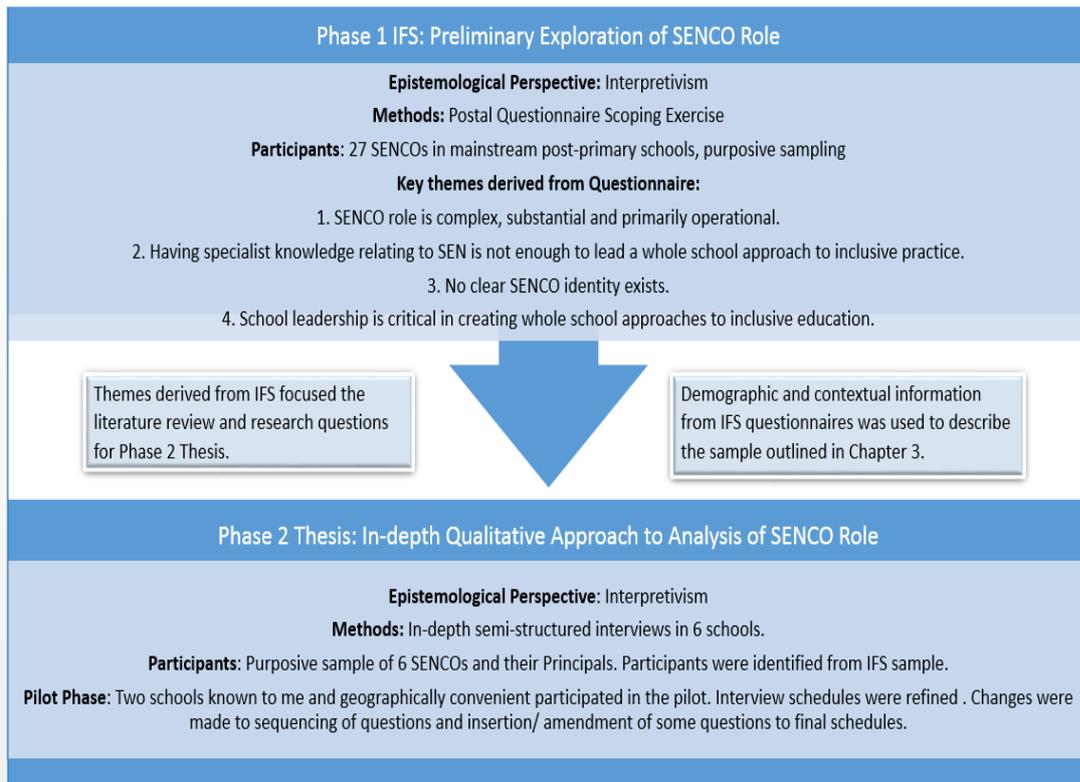
learning organisation in such pluralist democratic contexts. While I endeavoured to establish and maintain a neutral stance throughout the research process conclusions derived from Phase One of the research have, to some extent, influenced my current approach but emergent findings from this study took precedence over my own beliefs (Mertens, 2010). Key themes derived from the IFS (Figure 3.1) partly influenced the design of the interview schedules. While the IFS indicated that the role was complex, substantial and heavy, interviews allowed me to probe this in greater detail. The IFS provided detailed descriptions of *what* was involved in the role but this study explored *why* and *how* it was complex and burdensome. For example, findings revealed that because SENCOs felt such enormous responsibility and duty of care to students with SEN and demonstrated *personal* commitment and passion to improve outcomes for students, they were unable to ‘switch off’ at the end of the day or to create defined role boundaries.

3.3 Research Design

An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted for the research (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014) to gain deep, rich insights into the lived experiences of SENCOs and their Principals. Figure 3.1 illustrates the phases involved in the collection of data.

The qualitative approach adopted, namely interviews, provided ‘an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project...in a *real life* context’ (Simons, 2009, p.10). This study took place in six schools and aimed to capture the perspectives of SENCOs and Principals in *their* contexts and as such served to provide a holistic understanding for me as researcher of the factors interacting to conceive perceptions of the role and ultimately, ways in which people act (Gray, 2004).

Figure 3.1: *Phases involved in the collection of data*



Qualitative research is generally small-scale, conducted in real contexts, and with a focus on depth rather than breadth of study (Denscombe, 2003). However, the capacity for generalisation and analytic benefits from multiple perspectives (Principals and SENCOs) and in multiple diverse contexts are considerably greater than those of single studies (Robson, 2011) and may facilitate theoretical generalisation to the profile of post-primary schools in Ireland. For example, interviewing both SENCOs and Principals not only allowed me to capture their perceptions of the SENCO role and leadership of special education in the school, it also provided an opportunity to observe and explore the relationships between individuals within and across sites in great detail. Such an approach, which provided a flexible design research strategy facilitated close engagement with the six sites and allowed me to compare and contrast not only contexts, but also the dynamics at play within contexts (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Equally, the reader may interpret the study in a way that facilitates

generalisation to other cases or contexts and, according to Wolcott (1994) provides opportunities for the reader to *complete* the researcher's contribution:

‘The art of descriptive research, I believe, is in portraying the case at hand so well that readers themselves make the generalizations for us. They fill in or complete the pattern work that we outline only faintly.’

(Wolcott, 1994, p.113)

3.4 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed as it represented a second phase of research. Using data available on school variables from questionnaires in the IFS six schools were selected. Purposive, rather than random sampling strategies are likely to be utilised in qualitative studies (Miles and Huberman, 1994). I selected schools where SENCOs were established in their roles in order to gain insight into the evolution of the role. This is not to say that schools excluded from this phase of research did not have SENCOs established in their roles. I wanted further selection criteria which allowed for variety based on demographic and school profile information. Therefore, the sample comprised a variety of schools according to geographical location (urban/rural); composition (boys/girls/mixed); socio-economic grouping (mainstream post-primary schools participating in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools initiative (DEIS/disadvantaged schools (DES, 2005)/mainstream post-primary schools not participating in DEIS), size, school type (ETB/Voluntary/Comprehensive and language (Irish/English medium schools).

The student population in all six schools was relatively diverse and somewhat representative of a wide socio-economic spectrum. The disadvantaged DEIS schools in the study identified as having greater numbers of students with SEN. This was expected considering such schools

usually serve communities experiencing severe socio-economic disadvantage. Disproportionality of students identified as having SEN and learning difficulties has been widely linked to lower socio-economic status (Banks and McCoy, 2011; Egan, 2013).

A brief profile of participating schools is presented. Further demographic information relating to participating SENCOs and Principals can be found in Appendix D.

School ‘A’

This co-educational school has a population of almost 1400 students and is situated in a large town close to an urban centre (Table 3.2). It is a community college managed by an Education and Training Board (ETB) and accepted students predominantly from the local catchment area and from outlying rural communities. The school declared that the majority of students came from middle socio-economic groups. An allocation of 331.28 resource teaching hours were granted for the academic year 2016-2017, an increase of 8.5 hours from 322.78 the previous year (NCSE, 2016). There were approximately 160 students in receipt of resource teaching hours and a further thirty in receipt of learning support which equated to 13.5 per cent of the entire student population.

Table 3.2: *School A Demographic Information*

School Type	Enrol-ment	Gender	Catchment	DEIS Status	Total Resource Hours Allocation	% Students with SEN
Community College; ETB	1400	Co-ed	Urban; large town; rural	No	331.28	13.5%

School ‘B’

This all-girls school is situated in a small town and has a population of almost 800 girls (Table 3.3). It is a voluntary secondary school established by a Catholic religious order. It is managed by the Le Chéile Schools Trust, a collaborative trust involving fourteen religious congregations committed to the Catholic faith. The school indicated that students came from predominantly middle income groups from the surrounding townlands and rural communities. This school also had capacity for boarding and these students came from counties throughout Ireland. The school was allocated 78.75 resource teaching hours for the academic year 2016-2017, which represents an decrease of 5.1 hours from the previous year allocation of 83.85 (NCSE, 2016). Nineteen students were in receipt of resource teaching support while a further 100 received learning support. As a proportion of the overall student population, 14.87 per cent were in receipt of additional support for SEN.

Table 3.3: *School B Demographic Information*

School Type	Enrol-ment	Gender	Catchment	DEIS Status	Total Resource Hours Allocation	% Students with SEN
Free Voluntary School	800	All Girls	Small town; rural	No	78.75	14.87%

School 'C'

This co-educational community college has an enrolment of almost 500 students and is managed by the ETB (Table 3.4). It is situated in a large town and students come from the local area and outlying rural communities. A diverse student population characterises the school including English language learners and members of the Travelling Community. A special class for students who are deaf or hearing impaired has been in existence in the school since the 1970's. The school also has disadvantaged DEIS status. The school was allocated 157.58

resource teaching hours for the academic year 2016-2017, which represents an increase of 25.08 hours from the previous year allocation of 132.50 (NCSE, 2016). This equates to more than one additional full-time teaching post. Twenty students were in receipt of resource teaching support while a further 90 received learning support. As a proportion of the overall student population, 22.2 per cent were in receipt of additional support for SEN.

Table 3.4: *School C Demographic Information*

School Type	Enrol-ment	Gender	Catchment	DEIS Status	Total Resource Hours Allocation	% Students with SEN
Community College; ETB	500	Co-ed	Large town; rural	Yes	157.58	22.2%

School 'D'

School 'D' is also a co-educational school with enrolment of almost 400 students (Table 3.5). The school is relatively new and was only established in 2006. This community college is situated in a large urban area and is managed by the ETB. The catchment area is wide and students came from both urban and rural areas in addition to city suburbs. The school indicated that students generally came from mixed socio-economic groups but with a majority from middle income groupings. The allocation of resource teaching hours to the school for the academic year 2016-2017 was 70.78, which represented a decrease of 4.67 hours from the previous year allocation of 75.45 (NCSE, 2016). A total of thirteen students received resource teaching support and a further thirty-five were in receipt of learning support. The proportion of students receiving additional support for SEN equated to 12.3 per cent of the overall student population.

Table 3.5: *School D Demographic Information*

School Type	Enrol-ment	Gender	Catchment	DEIS Status	Total Resource Hours Allocation	% Students with SEN
Community College; ETB	400	Co-ed	Inner city; urban; city suburbs; rural	No	70.78	12.3%

School 'E'

The population of this co-educational school is almost 500 students (Table 3.6). The school is situated in a small town and students generally come from the town or surrounding rural areas. The school indicated that, to a greater extent, students come from lower socio-economic groups and the population comprises a diverse cultural mix, with significant numbers of English language learners and students from the Travelling Community. The school maintains disadvantaged DEIS status. There are also three special classes in the school, two for students with ASD and one for students with MGLD. In the academic year 2016-2017, the school was granted an allocation of 96.38 resource teaching hours. This represents a decrease of 22.95 hours from the previous year, when 119.33 hours were granted (NCSE, 2016). This equates to the loss of one full-time teaching post in the school. Approximately forty-three students were in receipt of resource teaching support with a further thirty-five receiving additional learning support. This indicated that 16.2 per cent of the student population was in receipt of additional support for SEN.

Table 3.6: *School E Demographic Information*

School Type	Enrol -ment	Gender	Catchment	DEIS Status	Total Resource Hours Allocation	% Students with SEN
Community College; ETB	500	Co-ed	Small town; rural	Yes	96.38	16.2%

School 'F'

School 'F' is an all-boys school with enrolment of almost 170 students. This privately owned voluntary secondary school is located in a small town, with a small catchment area in the local town and surrounding countryside (see Table 3.7). The school indicated that students generally came from middle socio-economic groups. The allocation of resource teaching hours to the school for the academic year 2016-2017 was 32.98, which represented a decrease of 8.07 hours from the previous year allocation of 41.05 (NCSE, 2016). A total of 14 students received resource teaching support and a further 14 were in receipt of learning support. The proportion of students receiving additional support for SEN equated to 16.76 per cent of the overall student population.

Table 3.7: *School F Demographic Information*

School Type	Enrol -ment	Gender	Catchment	DEIS Status	Total Resource Hours Allocation	% Students with SEN
Free Voluntary School	170	All boys	Small town; rural	No	32.98	16.76%

While further demographic information about participants is included in Appendix D, Tables 3.8 and 3.9 provide a brief synopsis of demographic information.

Table 3.8: *Participating SENCO Demographic Information*

SENCO	Gender	Years Teaching	Years SENCO	Management Status	Contact Teaching Hours	Qualifications relevant to SEN
SENCO 1	Female	35	14	Assistant Principal Post	0	Graduate Diploma in SEN
SENCO 2	Female	10	1	Assistant Principal Post	22	Graduate Diploma in Educational Psychology
SENCO 3	Female	29	6	No post	22	Graduate Diploma in SEN
SENCO 4	Female	20	6	Assistant Principal Post	19	Graduate Diploma in SEN
SENCO 5	Female	32	32	Special Duties Post	18	Graduate Diploma in SEN
SENCO 6	Male	25	8	Principal	0	None

Table 3.9: *Participating Principal Demographic Information*

Principal	Gender	Years Teaching Experience	Years Principal Experience
Principal 1	Female	26	4
Principal 2	Female	28	4
Principal 3	Male	10	5
Principal 4	Male	18	10
Principal 5	Female	28	6
Principal 6	Male	25	4

3.5 Methods of Data-collection

A qualitative approach was adopted in order to answer the research questions. The lack of previous research on the topic warranted a qualitative approach; stories from the field were listened to and recorded (Stake, 1995). The study was not concerned with *extracting data* from

participants but rather sought to develop a shared understanding of leadership and management of SEN. Therefore, the predominant data-collection procedure was engagement in semi-structured interviews or ‘guided conversations’ with Principals and SENCOs (Appendices G and H) (Yin, 2014, p.108).

3.5.1 Interviews

Three approaches to interviews exist; structured, unstructured and semi-structured (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). A decision to undertake any type of interview depends, to a certain extent, upon the locus of control during the interview (Powney and Watts, 1987). Structured interviews engage interviewees in conversations guided by structured questions (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009), whereas unstructured interviews allow the interviewee considerable freedom in terms of where the conversation leads, as the researcher begins with loosely defined themes or terms of reference (Robson, 2011). Semi-structured interviews fall somewhere in the middle, facilitating in-depth exploration of pre-defined themes or concepts, while simultaneously providing flexibility and scope for discussion of themes omitted from the literature review (Bryman, 2008). As this study was exploring relatively *uncharted waters* (in the Irish context at least) individual semi-structured interviews were considered the most effective method for collecting information related to known and unknown themes. Moreover, semi-structured interviews facilitated comparative analysis both within and across schools (Yin, 2014) in that similar questions are asked in each school (Bryman, 2008). However, while the semi-structured approach to interviewing facilitated a more relaxed, conversational interaction between the participants and myself, limitations to such an approach must be acknowledged.

When undertaking a comparative analysis of responses to questions asked in interviews, the researcher must be certain that any potential differences in responses arise from differences amongst the participants rather than in the questions asked (Denzin, 1989). Semi-structured

interviews allow for probing. Effective probing is a critical element of skilled interviewing. The seasoned interviewer will use detailed probes such as specific questions to clarify and extend meaning (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). While probing during interviews facilitates a deeper exploration of topics, or provides clarification, opportunities to change the words but not the meaning of questions acknowledges that not all words or phrases have the same meaning to every participant and not every participant uses the same vocabulary (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). Differences in language use between Principals and SENCOs were evident in this study. Special education has its own language, which those immersed in special education are fluent in. Principals were not necessarily as fluent and therefore greater levels of probing were offered. Undoubtedly, in semi-structured interviews, validity and reliability depend, not upon the standardised use of the same words in every question, but upon transmitting *equivalence of meaning* (Denzin, 1989). When conveyance of meaning is standardised, comparability of responses across participants may be facilitated.

Interviews require planning to ensure that interview questions relate to research questions (Bryman, 2011). There are seven stages of the research process involving interviews according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009):

1. thematising the interview project,
2. designing,
3. interviewing,
4. transcribing,
5. analysing,
6. verifying and
7. reporting.

They insist on the value of conceptualising an interview topic in advance of interviewing and planning the entire process through the seven stages before engaging in the overall process, guidance which was considered for the purpose of this study.

Interviews were conducted with twelve participants; five SENCOs, one SEN Teacher and six Principals working in mainstream post-primary schools. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

3.5.2 Developing the Interview Schedules

Key themes derived from an extensive review of the literature and influenced by findings from the initial phase of research (IFS), guided the design of interview schedules which served to increase the validity of the interview schedules (Table 3.10).

Table 3.10: *Developing the Interview Schedule*

Key Themes in Literature	Interview Schedule Topics	Sample Questions from SENCO and Principal Interview Schedules
<p>Importance of leadership to develop whole-school approaches to inclusive special education</p>	<p>Leadership in SEN</p> <p>Leading Change</p> <p>Whole-school Approaches</p>	<p>What does leadership in SEN mean to you? (SENCO & Principal)</p> <p>Do you think there should be a leader of SEN in the school? Why/why not? Who should it be? (SENCO)</p> <p>Can you tell me what you know about the new proposed model of SEN resource allocation? (SENCO & Principal)</p> <p>Who do you think should lead and manage implementation of changes to special education in your school once the new model is implemented? (SENCO & Principal)</p> <p>Are there systems in place to support staff in dealing with change? (Principal)</p> <p>Are there whole-school systems in place to communicate information about students with SEN?</p>
<p>Importance of developing schools as learning organisations/communities of practice-relational & collaborative nature of SENCO role</p>	<p>SENCO & Principal Professional Development</p> <p>Staff Development</p>	<p>To what extent is in-service education effective in supporting you in your role as SENCO?</p> <p>How are you supported to pursue in-service education in this area? (SENCO)</p> <p>Are there opportunities for you to share your expertise in this area with your colleagues? (SENCO)</p> <p>Have you engaged in any CPD for Principals (either formally accredited or informally) that support you in leading and implementing inclusive approaches to SEN? (Principal)</p> <p>Are there opportunities for staff, including members of the SEN team, to share their expertise in this area with colleagues? If so, how is this facilitated? (Principal)</p> <p>How do you decide upon staff development priorities? (Principal)</p> <p>How are staff supported to pursue in-service education in this area? (SENCO)</p>

<p>Complexities attributed to inclusive special education-models of provision, dilemmas of difference, models of resource allocation</p>	<p>School Context</p> <p>Challenges</p>	<p>Tell me about the ethos of the school. (SENCO & Principal)</p> <p>Do you think students with SEN are well served in your school? Are they making progress? How do you know? (SENCO & Principal)</p> <p>In your opinion what are they key challenges to including students with SEN in your school? (SENCO & Principal)</p> <p>Do you as the Principal encounter any challenges with the coordination of SEN in your school?</p> <p>Do you think your SENCO encounters any challenges in trying to coordinate SEN provision?</p>
<p>Inherent tensions related to developing SENCOs as strategic leaders/SENCO identity/Workload/Lack of formal recognition/status</p>	<p>SENCO Identity</p> <p>School Context</p> <p>SENCO Role-Responsibilities</p>	<p>Do you see yourself primarily as: Learning Support Teacher/Resource Teacher/Special Educational Needs teacher/SEN Coordinator or something else? What shapes this perception? (SENCO)</p> <p>How do you think others in the school view your role? (SENCO)</p> <p>Do you encounter any challenges in fulfilling your role? (SENCO)</p> <p>What does or would support you in fulfilling your role? (SENCO)</p> <p>In your opinion, how supportive are staff in general, to including students with SEN in the school? (SENCO & Principal)</p> <p>Tell me about your role as SENCO. What do you do? Is this what you think you should be doing? What informs this? Are there other duties you feel you should have? Or are there responsibilities that you currently have that you feel you shouldn't? (SENCO)</p> <p>Has your role changed in any way? Have any policies impacted upon or altered your role as SENCO?</p> <p>Tell me about the role of the SENCO. What does s/he do? (Principal)</p> <p>Do the duties of your SENCO support you in your role as Principal? If so, how? (Principal)</p> <p>Do you think your SENCO has enough support in the role? (Principal)</p>

	Conclusion	If you could make recommendations to the Minister for Education about the SENCO role, what would you say? (SENCO & Principal)
Attributes of effective SENCOs-advocacy, passion, expert knowledge, interpersonal skills, organisational skills	General ‘warm up’ questions SENCO Role-Responsibilities from Principal’s Perspective	Tell me how you became SENCO and why you do the job. (SENCO) How were you appointed to the role? (SENCO) Did you actively pursue a career in special education? (SENCO) How did you become interested in special education? What motivates your interest? (SENCO) Do the duties of your SENCO support you in your role as Principal? If so, how? (Principal)

3.5.3 Administering the interviews

The greatest challenge for the researcher as a methodological instrument in the research is choosing questions which encourage participants to talk openly (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). Hence, I began with broad, general questions and proceeded with questions that focused the participants on key themes of the research. I attempted to put participants at ease by outlining the structure of the interview and making explicit my expectations (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Conversation began with a discussion of ethical issues related to the study such as informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Consent was sought to audio-record interviews and participants were reminded that they could withdraw consent at any point (see Appendices E and F for Participant Consent Forms). I also reminded participants that I would send a draft of findings to them for member checking to ensure accuracy and interpretation of data (Oliver, 2003), upon which they could make amendments or refuse to have their data used in the research.

The initial broad questions also helped to put participants at ease and set the tone for a *guided conversation* (Yin, 2014). These questions related to the participants experiences and expertise (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews allowed for probing of unanticipated themes (Robson, 2011). While the issues associated with probing were previously discussed, participants were encouraged by way of both verbal and non-verbal probing such as nodding and saying things like ‘interesting...tell me more.....’ thus ensuring a neutral stance. In this way, a relaxed and secure atmosphere was realised from the outset and a positive rapport developed. It was important to refrain from responses such as ‘I agree’, ‘that’s great’. The power differential between the participants and me as the researcher needed addressing to safeguard an atmosphere where the participants would speak more than me because researchers are often seen in positions of power (Denscombe, 2003). To address this power differential, all interviews were held in the participants’ schools at a time and date suitable to them. As the

researcher, I was the invited guest. All interviews except one were conducted in May/June 2016. A final interview with a Principal took place in early September 2016. Interviews with SENCOs took longer and lasted on average two hours. Interviews with Principals lasted approximately one hour. Steps were taken to minimise the impact of interruptions but I was cognisant of the ebb and flow in post-primary schools and assured participants of my flexibility in the event of unforeseen interruptions.

3.5.4 Pilot phase

It is recommended that a pilot of any instruments be undertaken to fine-tune the design, content and overall process involved in collection and analysis of data (Robson, 2002). Piloting of the instruments and procedures took place once ethical clearance was granted and proved to be a worthwhile endeavour as it provided some valuable insights into my own abilities as a researcher. Two schools participated in the pilot phase of the research. Both were all-boys voluntary secondary schools managed by Catholic bodies. One was an urban DEIS school with a student population of 450, while the other was located in the city suburbs and had a student population of 550. Both schools were selected because of the professional relationships I had developed with the SENCOs and Principals through the SENCO Forum established in conjunction with the Principal's network. Additionally, both were geographically accessible to me (Yin, 2014). Mutual trust had already been established which facilitated honest and constructive feedback related to the research process.

The pilot phase was important and feedback was constructive. Although all pilot participants found most of the questions straightforward and unambiguous, some 'tweaking' was required to clarify what was being asked. Some questions were also repetitive and were therefore omitted. The sequencing of questions also didn't follow an organic pattern and some

restructuring was required. Both Principals felt that all questions were relevant and reported the time taken for the interview was reasonable. The SENCO interviews took two hours in one instance and almost two and a half hours in another. However, while I had originally anticipated spending time after the interviews to read some school-based documents, both SENCOs incorporated the exploration of documents such as IEPs, SEN policies etc. into the interview and this worked well and helped to contextualise some of the discussion.

3.6 Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis may be described as a dynamic method driven by creative and intuitive processes of inductive reasoning, thinking and theorising (Bryman, 2008). As a process it can uncover the unexpected and as such requires researchers to develop skills which allow them to remain open to new ways of understanding and interpreting the phenomenon under scrutiny.

Following data-collection, all interviews were fully transcribed and printed. Transcription involves a change of medium which raises issues relating to accuracy, fidelity and interpretation of data (Gibbs, 2007). To counter such issues and facilitate closer engagement with data, I transcribed interviews myself (Flick, 2007) and revisited audio recordings in tandem with printed transcripts during the process of coding, categorising, thematising and synthesising. Hearing participant voices allowed me to interpret data more holistically, not only in relation to *what* they said (in written form), but also in terms of *how* they said it (in audio form)(Kvale, 1996). Manual transcriptions, together with a process of thematic coding also provided an audit trail (Bazeley, 2013).

Thematic analysis is a common approach to qualitative data analysis as it offers an accessible and theoretical flexible approach (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Systematic and rigorous

analysis of data was an intrinsically iterative process comprising six phases as summarised in Table 3.11(Braun and Clark, 2006; 2013; Bazeley, 2009; 2013).

Thematic analysis was an appropriate method for this study as it had the advantage of allowing theoretical freedom relating to the analysis, which was both data driven and theory derived from the literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It also facilitated close engagement with data in order to identify patterns in participants' behaviours and/or responses. A theme is a pattern in data which identifies something of significance in relation to the research questions (Gibbs, 2007). Some themes were imposed from the beginning. For example, the IFS spotlighted the importance of support from the Principal in developing the SENCO role. Therefore, analysis looked for data which evidenced this pattern such as the awareness Principal's had of the work their SENCOs undertook, the level of priority assigned to SEN in the school, and feedback from SENCOs, for example.

Table 3.11: *Data Analysis (adapted from Braun and Clark, 2006, p.87)*

Analytical Process	Practical Application	Iterative Process
Organise the Data	Phase 1-Transcribe and be familiar with data	Assign data to refined concepts to depict meaning Filtering of more abstract concepts/group data into themes  Assigning data to themes/subthemes to portray meaning  Assigning meaning
Generation of Initial Codes	Phase 2-Systematic open coding of data with reference to theoretical propositions/emergent codes	
Identifying Themes	Phase 3-Categorisation of codes into themes/subsequent numerical coding of themes	
Mapping & Reviewing Themes	Phase 4-Generating a thematic map of analysis and reviewing themes	
Defining & Finalising Themes	Phase 5-Data Reduction-On-going analysis to refine the specifics of each theme-generating clear definitions and names for each theme and subtheme	
Compiling Report	Phase 6-Final Analysis/Testing and Validating Relating back of the analysis to literature, research questions and theoretical propositions while drafting of the report.	

Interviewing SENCOs and their Principals allowed me to analyse this pattern from both perspectives and demonstrated that the attitudes, beliefs and values of all SENCOs and their Principals were closely aligned and not only did SENCOs feel supported by their Principals, Principals felt supported by their SENCOs. Other themes did emerge from data. For example, when both SENCOs and Principals were questioned about leadership in special education and were specifically asked ‘what does leadership in special education look like? What does it involve?’ a strong connection was made between leadership and expert knowledge. Both SENCOs and their Principals felt that any leadership in special education was closely linked to the level of specialist knowledge held by SENCOs.

Generation of codes, categories, and themes involved *intensive reading* (Charmaz, 2006) and re-reading. I am cognisant that ‘the strengths of qualitative data rest very centrally on the competence with which their analysis is carried out’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.9) and for me, the model developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) -from the initial familiarisation with data through transcribing of interviews, to systematic open coding and generation of initial themes

to the final refinement of themes-facilitated close engagement with data. It also enabled more sophisticated levels of analysis which considered the 'complex configuration of processes within each case', an understanding of 'the local dynamics' within each school, and which ultimately allowed 'patterning of variables that transcend particular cases' to emerge (Miles and Huberman, 1994, pp.205-206). A codebook (Gibbs, 2007) was developed following intensive reading and facilitated data reduction. Every code generated was categorised and eventually mapped to key themes. Illustrative raw data were assigned to themes and it was this codebook which was used to guide the write up of findings. Appendix I demonstrates how elements of the theme 'Complexities of the SENCO Role' were arrived at from the initial generation of codes to the development of categories with associated qualitative data. The iterative process involved in the analysis facilitated the identification of patterns, inconsistencies, unexpected themes or contradictions (Hammersley, 2007).

Throughout the analysis process, I looked for disconfirming evidence or alternative explanations of the findings in an effort to test my own favoured line of interpretation and potential bias (Kuzel and Like, 1991). Some conflicting data is included in the findings, which ultimately adds to the credibility of final interpretations (Kuzel and Like, 1991). For example, I held strong (negative) views about the practice of allocating part-time resource teaching hours to significant numbers of teachers in schools. While I still believe that the numbers of teachers (and moreover the selection of suitable teachers) should be carefully managed and monitored in schools, my views have softened as a result of the research. Two Principals indicated that they consciously involved mainstream subject teachers in special education. The rationale offered was based on the belief that it fostered a whole-school approach to SEN, and allowed teachers an opportunity to work with students in different settings, thus raising awareness of special education amongst staff. These Principals also conveyed how some teachers, having

worked with students with SEN in a support capacity, then decided to pursue postgraduate qualifications in special education.

Two levels of thematic analysis occurred as outlined in Table 3.12. Comparative analysis examined participants across schools in relation to each other. While similar themes were derived from all schools, nuanced and subtle differences existed. The various processes and outcomes in each school needed to be understood from the individual contexts of practice and from the individual perspectives of Principals and SENCOs operating within these contexts. This lent itself to developing more ‘sophisticated descriptions and more powerful explanations’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 172).

Table 3.12: *Levels of Data Analysis*

Level of Analysis	Description of Analysis
Analysis of interview data with Principal and SENCO within individual schools	The data were analysed in terms of the perspectives of each participant and transcripts were examined in terms of how they related to each other. These transcripts were compared and contrasted for divergent views and common themes. Summary memos were generated outlining the relationships between data generated in each school.
Comparative analysis of interview data with Principals and SENCOs across schools	As qualitative data were collected in multiple sites, the study sought ‘to build abstractions across cases’ (Merriam, 1998, p.195). It explored SENCOs’ perceptions of their role in relation to all other SENCOs in the study. It also compared Principals’ data across all six schools. Transcripts for all six SENCOs were compared for differences and similarities which allowed exploration of the extent to which their roles were linked to factors such as school size, impact of having a POR, systems in place to communicate information to staff, school culture, team approach, expertise, etc.

As an interpretivist researcher, teacher educator and former SENCO, personal experience of the phenomenon, findings from the IFS and a survey of the literature led to the formulation of a theoretical framework which guided the mining in the field. Analysis of data was based on my interpretations of what was considered meaningful and important. The lens through which analysis occurred was primarily based upon key themes and concepts derived from the literature review and findings from the IFS and have to a certain extent influenced the types of relationships I looked for in data. Nonetheless, as this study is far more extensive than the initial IFS phase richer, more nuanced and dilemmatic findings did emerge while researching the phenomenon.

3.7 Quality of the Research

Qualitative research has been criticised by researchers loyal to other research paradigms such as positivism for its lack of reliability and validity (Hammersley, 2007). It is important to demonstrate that this study was conducted in a way that makes transparent its value and its credibility. It is acknowledged that threats to validity and reliability cannot be completely erased, but instead procedures may be put in place to mitigate these threats throughout the research process (Stake, 1995). Reliability refers to the extent to which an approach to research renders consistent results (Robson, 2011). Validity is concerned with the extent to which research instruments observe or measure what they set out to measure (Punch, 2009). In qualitative research issues of reliability and validity are addressed through honesty, transparency, trustworthiness, authenticity, depth, scope, subjectivity, emotion and idiographic approaches to capturing individuals (Cresswell and Miller, 2000).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is perhaps the most important benchmark for judging the value of qualitative research. The study needs to convince the reader that findings are genuine and derived from data. Establishing trustworthiness depends on the following elements: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 2000).

Credibility considers the extent to which the findings are a convincing reflection of the phenomenon being explored. It can be enhanced by a number of strategies including:

- Contextualisation of the study
- Transparency in relation to the research process
- Triangulation (in terms of methods and/or participants)
- Negative case analysis
- Member checking

Contextualisation of the study

A thorough review of the literature relating to the SENCO role and inclusive leadership was undertaken to ensure I had an understanding of key concepts and contexts within which SENCOs and their Principals operated. Furthermore, data collected from SENCOs about themselves and their schools during both phases of research provided enough information to generate school profiles and allowed me to appropriately contextualise the findings from this study.

Transparency in relation to the research process

This study provided a transparent account of procedures adopted in relation to the:

- aims and purpose of the research (Chapters One and Three);
- context for the research (Chapters One and Three);
- development of the research instruments and their relationship to themes explored in the literature (Chapters Two and Three);

- selection of the sample (Chapter Three);
- methods of data-collection and analysis embedded in an interpretivist paradigm (Chapter Three); and
- inclusion of original data provided sufficient evidence of how data were interpreted (Chapters Four and Five).

(Hammersley, 2007)

Triangulation (in terms of methods and/or participants)

Credibility can be enhanced through a process of triangulation (Cohen et al, 2011) which can be achieved by cross-checking information about a phenomenon from multiple sources (Cresswell, 2009; Robson, 2011). Triangulation is an ‘attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint’ (Cohen et al 2011, p.254). Several types of triangulation exist and can involve: the use of multiple methods, multiple participants, multiple researchers, and/or the use of multiple theories. This study undertook triangulation by method (Denzin, 1989) in that data collected from SENCOs through questionnaires during the IFS were used in this study to generate detailed descriptions of the school profiles. This information was then used to contextualise findings from this study. Triangulation using multiple participants also occurred and I explored the SENCO role in post-primary schools from the perspectives of SENCOs and Principals. Likewise, triangulating perspectives across participants and schools allowed for converging lines of inquiry through adopting a corroboratory approach (Cohen et al, 2011). As six schools were involved, I was also able to triangulate the topic areas across participants because interview questions were relatively standardised and allowed for comparative analysis of some perspectives. For example, I was able to compare whether having a POR led to divergent views on aspects of the SENCO role, or whether disadvantaged (DEIS) status influenced the role.

Negative case analysis

Mentioned previously, this strategy relates to the researcher's awareness of potential bias and favoured line of interpretation. Efforts to look for alternative explanations or disconfirming evidence in the findings remained a priority throughout the analysis of data (Bryman, 2008). A reflexive orientation, which guided the research process encouraged me, as the researcher, to examine my own interpretive biases and reactions to data and thus should enhance the overall credibility of the study.

Member checking

Member checking is an integral part of qualitative research and involves revisiting research participants to seek their comment on data, and in the case of this study, my interpretations of their data. I emailed a draft copy of findings to participants to ascertain not only the accuracy of information, but also the interpretation provided (Stake, 1995). For example, in an interview with one particular SENCO, it emerged strongly from the transcripts that, while enormous efforts were made to generate and disseminate information to all staff about students with SEN (including support plans, electronic profiles on the school server for each student) the SENCO doubted if many teachers actually used the information, if indeed they read it at all. However, when I corresponded with her about my interpretations she asked if this could be tempered for two reasons. Firstly, she said the scheduling of the interview (mid-May-nearing the end of the academic year) meant that the full cycle of review for students with SEN had not been completed and therefore she hadn't received feedback from teachers about how students with SEN had progressed in their subject areas. This member checking resulted in the SENCO changing her views and she reported that most teachers referred to documentation developed by the SENCO and used it to inform their planning. She said this was evident in September

when they developed their own class level support plans for students with SEN. Secondly, the SENCO herself said she was simply tired and in need of a holiday and perhaps felt more negative as a result.

While the procedures described above were implemented to improve the quality of the research, qualitative research is also criticised for its lack of external validity (Mertens, 2010) or transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). However, Yin (2009) would argue that multiple case study approaches, or approaches which study the phenomenon from multiple perspectives, increase opportunities for *theoretical replication* when two or more cases demonstrate support for the same theory. Thematic analysis of findings outlined in Chapter Four provides evidence to support findings across six sites. Conclusions were arrived at only after the findings were tested against concepts explored in the literature review (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and from follow-up feedback from participants. This not only increased internal validity, but also facilitated feasibility of theoretical replication, thus enhancing external validity.

I embarked upon this research with openness to new learning, especially as the phenomenon is under-researched in the Irish context and therefore participant voices were given space to emerge. Divergent views or outliers were also considered as they provided a rich source for further analytic thinking which was incorporated in my theorising of the SENCO role (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Finally, the compilation of an electronic database preserved and presented data in an accessible format that will provide a chain of evidence or audit trail from which other investigators can review evidence directly and determine for themselves if the findings are justified (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Yin, 2014).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted under the aegis of the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee and adhered to the strictures and guidelines stipulated within the British Educational Research Association (2011).

Undertaking qualitative research involves interaction with humans, which can be complicated and more susceptible to risk (Mertens, 2010). This study explored the SENCO role from the perspectives of SENCOs and Principals and from the outset, was about valuing their perspectives when working *at the coalface* in post-primary schools in Ireland. Such an approach reflects the importance of ‘value judgements’ (May, 2001, p.39) rather than absolute truth claims which seek to capture the opinions, beliefs and experiences (life and professional) which have shaped these underlying value systems. Such value systems impact upon practice and need to be understood in terms of the wider socio-economic context and also the relationships existing in the contexts that may influence the situation being researched (May, 2001). Such value judgements are applicable to the researcher also. My own life and professional experiences have influenced my attitudes, beliefs and opinions to the research. However, an acknowledgement of the influence of value judgements is not problematic in itself as long as the final piece of research is not distorted in any way (May, 2001).

Having considered the role of values in this study, certain ethical considerations underpinned the research. Any research involving human interaction obliges researchers to consider the impact on participants. In the event of sensitive issues arising from the research (for example, differences in expectations/perspectives and views held by SENCOs and their Principals), or highlighting of challenges and inequalities faced by SENCOs and Principals, the onus was on me as the researcher to respect the rights of the participants, to honour the schools I visited, and to report my research honestly and fully (Cresswell and Clark, 2011). Such an approach

upholds standards of integrity and transparency. However, it was also my responsibility as a researcher to minimise any potential harm to participants. Balancing my duty of care to participants with my duty to report research accurately and honestly could create a tension. However, I must consider that ‘research is neither a basic right nor necessity’ (Ensign, 2003, p.43) in my quest to contribute useful knowledge to the field. Providing opportunities for participants to review and amend *their* data and my interpretation of their data gave a level of control back to participants. As an aside, when I was recruiting potential sites for inclusion in this study, one SENCO decided not to participate as she felt there may have been potential conflict between the views she expressed with those of her Principal. The challenge presented by tensions is not easily addressed. As the research focused on the changing role of the SENCO, in a turbulent socio-economic context, there is a strong possibility tensions will arise from the research process which cannot be remedied by me as the researcher nor by the SENCOs and Principals through participation in the research.

I was not connected with most participants in the study and therefore the risk of insider bias was minimal (Cresswell, 2009). I did however have previous associations with two SENCOs which developed when they undertook and successfully completed the *Combined Postgraduate Diploma in SEN* (PGDSEN) in my institution a few years ago. In addition, one of these SENCOs was also a member of a local SENCO Forum I coordinate. There was no power relationship between us and their views (and decision to participate or not) in no way impacted upon the relationship we had developed. If anything, our positive rapport engendered trust. I felt they trusted me and were more forthcoming in their responses as a result. That said, having taught both SENCOs, they were acutely aware of my own expectations and value judgements relating to their role and inclusive education. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the influence my teaching had on shaping their views (for better or for worse) or the potential to offer socially desirable responses (Denzin, 1989).

All participants provided informed consent based on explicit information specifying the nature of the research (Appendices E and F), the rationale for the research, and the position of the researcher, the benefits and risks involved in participating, requirements for participation, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw. However, while assurances of confidentiality and anonymity are integral to the research process (Cohen et al, 2011, Cresswell, 2009), Ireland is a small country, and special education as a field is even smaller. According to Ensign (2003), confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed. I did my absolute best to maintain confidentiality and anonymity and will continue to do so as I disseminate the research. My concern for maintaining anonymity partly resulted in a change in terms of how findings were written up. Initially I planned to present each school as a single case study but once the analysis was completed I found that there was potential for some schools to be identified. Removing certain identifiable characteristics did not resolve the issue as some of these contextual characteristics informed the interpretation and were therefore necessary. While Chapter Three offers descriptions for each school, the names of individual research participants were changed and potential identifiers eliminated. A thematic analysis of findings also shifted the focus from individual cases (i.e. schools) to key themes that emerged across schools.

Electronic and written information will be kept strictly confidential, subject to the limitations of the law, and will be accessed only me as the researcher. Excerpts from data collected during the research process may be used in potential publications or paper presentations, but under no circumstances will a name or any identifying characteristics be included. Electronic data collected for the research will be stored securely on a password protected computer. Hard-copy data will be stored securely in a locked cabinet in my office. All data will be destroyed after a period of five years, following completion of the study.

3.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter presented a detailed account of the philosophical approach adopted by me the researcher, the research questions and chosen research design, namely a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm. Data-collection methods employed in the study and the subsequent data analysis procedures were outlined, as were ethical considerations and issues relating to the quality of the research. Findings derived from interviews with Principals and SENCOs will be presented and analysed thematically in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

This chapter examines how the SENCO role is conceptualised in post-primary schools and is specifically concerned with leadership and management of inclusive special education. It charts an analysis of data collected from interviews with SENCOs and Principals in six schools. Data facilitated rich, thick, descriptive thematic analysis of the SENCO role within dynamic and complex contexts of practice. Key themes from the literature review influenced decisions about the analysis of data but some unanticipated themes also emerged from data.

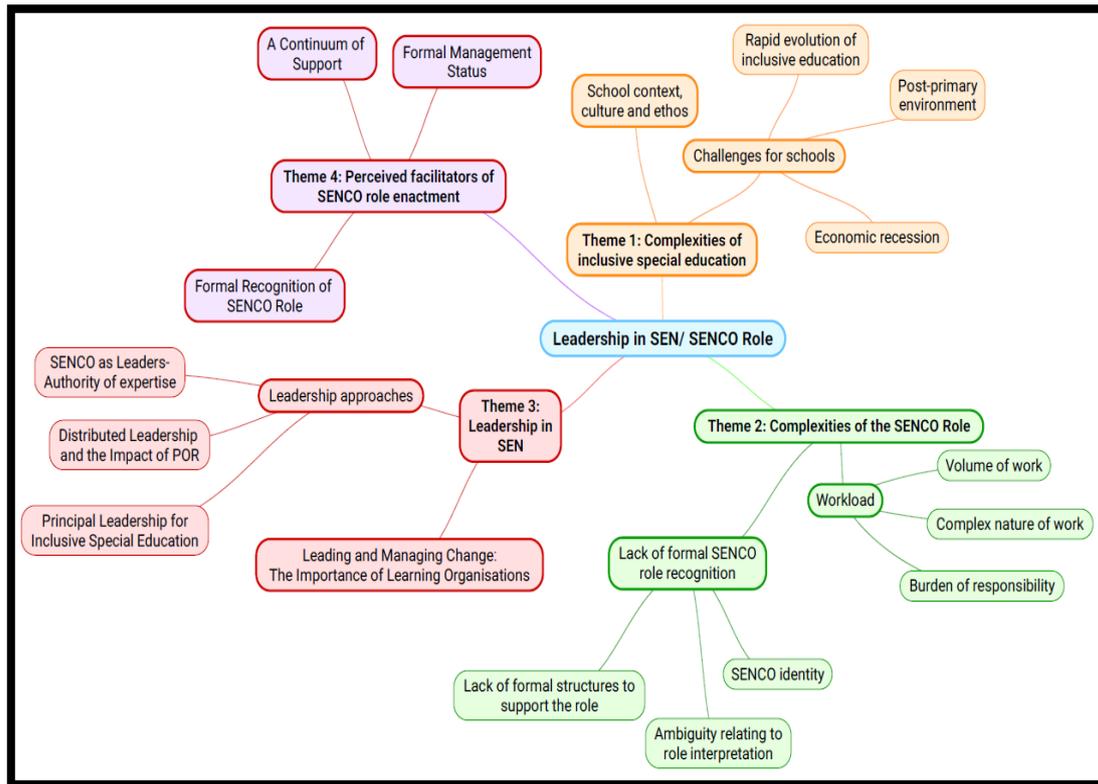
Four dominant themes emerged and are summarised as:

1. Complexities attributed to inclusive special education.

2. Complexities of the SENCO role.
3. Leadership in inclusive special education.
4. Perceived facilitators of effective SENCO role enactment.

Associated sub-themes related to dominant themes are fully illustrated in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: *Thematic map illustrating key themes emerging from the study*



4.1 Complexities Attributed to Inclusive Special Education

An extensive critique of literature in Chapter Two identified the challenges associated with the development of a universal definition of inclusion and the subsequent ambiguity attributed to its interpretation in educational contexts. Participating schools in this study reflected subtle diversity in how inclusive education was conceptualised and enacted in their various contexts. Schools' interpretations of inclusive special education and their subsequent implications for practice are discussed under the following sub-themes:

- School context, culture and ethos
- Challenges for schools

4.1.1 School context, culture and ethos

The importance of leadership in embedding an inclusive culture and ethos within the school emerged strongly from data. Other factors such as proportion of students with SEN, size of the school, staff attitudes to SEN and CPD also featured in data. Chapter Three provided some descriptions of participating schools, but to summarise, Table 4.1 illustrates the contexts for each school.

Table 4.1: *School Contexts*

School	School Type	Management Body	Disadvantaged Status	Enrolment	% Students with SEN
School A P1 & S1	Community College	ETB	No	1400	13.5
School B P2 & S2	Voluntary Secondary School	Le Chéile	No	800	14.87
School C P3 & S3	Community College	ETB	Yes	500	22.2
School D P4 & S4	Community College	ETB	No	400	12.3
School E P5 & S5	Community College	ETB	Yes	500	16.2
School F P6 & S6	Voluntary Secondary School	None/privately owned	No	170	16.76

Across all schools, both Principals and SENCOs spoke of the importance of *'caring for and nurturing students with SEN'* (P3) and all felt that inclusive education and an openness to embrace students with SEN was an important part of the school's ethos. The Principal in School F consistently represented the views of most participants when he said *'There's a huge caring element...because of the atmosphere in the school....it's a culture that has developed over time'* (P6). What emerged strongly from data were the overwhelmingly positive attitudes all

Principals and SENCOs had towards students with SEN and how closely aligned their attitudes, values and beliefs were within each school.

The role of the Principal in creating an inclusive ethos was reflected in data from both Principals' and SENCOs' perspectives, as conveyed by P5; *'if the Principal isn't on board and doesn't believe in it, well that filters down all the way'* (P5). SENCOs also reported the importance attributed to Principals in creating and nurturing inclusive school cultures, as reflected by S2 when she said,

'Sometimes you'd feel that the Principal is an authority figure, but she is wonderful and so supportive and really cares.'

(S2)

All five SENCOs and the SEN Teacher in School F (where the Principal was SENCO) commented on Principals' support, not only for their role, but for efforts to explicitly raise awareness of the whole-school benefits of inclusive education.

There was however, an acknowledgement of the complexities and challenges associated with schools' commitment to inclusive education. Challenging staff negative attitudes towards SEN, and raising awareness about students' needs was reported in three schools. In School D, both the Principal and SENCO were strong advocates for students with SEN and reported having to challenge negative attitudes on occasion. When asked how he managed such attitudes P4 replied,

'...in terms of tackling it.....Subtly we started to look at it and include SEN discussions, seminars...at staff meetings to get a greater awareness of it. It also meant me saying we were a very inclusive [school], explaining the context of the school, our mission statement...reminding staff that anybody's life can be touched by special needs.'

(P4)

Both the Principal and SENCO in school D also recounted how the school had a strong academic ethos, partly arising from its status as a gaelcholáiste (curriculum is taught exclusively through the Irish language). While it's overall proportion of students with SEN was the lowest amongst all schools (12.3 per cent, Table 4.1), it was still relatively representative. However, it's cohort of students with SEN, as reported by the SENCO, consisted of students with ASD and/or EBD, many of whom were 'high achievers' (S4). There were no students in receipt of learning support arising from cognitive learning disabilities and relatively few students with dyslexia. As a result, the SENCO conveyed how she always felt the need to advocate for the students and challenge staff attitudes:

'We're inclusive in that it's constantly on the agenda, but sometimes...there can be a lack of willingness to listen...it comes back to lack of understanding that it's not the student, they don't have the skills to cope. They are not being bold.'

(S4)

She described how she tried to ensure teachers understood the nature of students' SEN and its impact on learning and raised awareness of the need to maintain high expectations for all students, irrespective of diagnoses. Furthermore, S4 perceived that while most staff seemed committed to inclusive education, the academic nature (and success) of the school caused some subject teachers, on occasion, to refer students to the SENCO for further assessment who were perhaps achieving in the low average range. These teachers assumed there was perhaps something 'wrong' (S4) with these students and S4 made the point that this could have a negative impact on the students being referred for what they perceived to be the 'stupid test' (S4).

The other three schools reported staff commitment to and awareness of SEN as a key facilitator of inclusive practice. Incidentally, these three schools had the highest overall percentages of

students with SEN, two of which were DEIS schools. Is this perhaps linked to the volume of students with SEN, or the attitudes of staff, or both? As P5 commented,

'There's no worry when I come in in September and say 14 students have special needs..... Nobody will say damn that, I don't want to teach them. I've never heard it.'

(P5)

Both disadvantaged DEIS schools in the study were under the management of the ETB, which has a long vocational teaching tradition in Ireland. Interestingly, Principals and SENCOs in both of these schools reported having *reputations* as being the school in the area which caters well for students with diverse needs and indicated that NCSE Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) recommended their schools for certain students with SEN transitioning from primary education. While both schools seemed proud of the outcomes achieved by their students with SEN, S3 and S5 indicated it was *'a double edge sword because people often see us as a special school'* (S5). The Principal in School E seemed particularly frustrated by this dilemma and fervently asserted that the biggest challenge for the school was to remain inclusive,

'You cannot be an inclusive school unless you get every type of child, with every type of ability. And that is the biggest challenge because if you only have students with additional needs, well then you're not an inclusive school.'

(P5)

What is it about these schools that have gained them this *reputation*? Both Principals seem to think the staff was its best asset, as conveyed by P3 when he said:

'...the biggest thing is the staff dynamic and staff collegiality...staff have this idea that "we are not just here to teach the subject, we are here to make a difference by teaching the subject."'

(P3)

Relationships between colleagues seemed central to the process and the collaborative and dynamic approaches adopted when responding to the challenges of inclusive special education were deemed essential. The SENCO in School C further added,

'...you're in a very adversarial environment, you kind of bond with your colleagues because you have to, kind of to survive...it's a tough school so you do bond quite well.'

(S3)

However, P4 reported a different perspective on the issue of disproportionality of students with SEN in different schools, and asserted,

'I think there's a wider issue for Irish education and schools in general in how open they are to receiving students with SEN. It's still clear to me that there are soft barriers in existence.... Having entrance exams to try and find out about students that may have SEN. I still meet parents of incoming first years who are afraid to give information because of what they heard about other schools with regards to SEN. You only have to have a look at the allocation of resource hours to get a good indication of the soft barriers that I'm talking about.'

(P4)

School F-while not a DEIS school-had a high proportion of students with SEN and also indicated the importance of staff collegiality and flexibility in creating inclusive cultures. However, in this case perhaps the school size could be a factor, as reported by the Principal and the SEN Teacher. With less than 200 students in total and fewer than twenty teachers, *'a lovely family approach to the staff'* (P6) developed. The SEN Teacher added that while the size of the school facilitated *'a more relaxed environment'* (S6), she also cited the critical role of the Principal in creating an inclusive ethos. Interestingly, there was a sense in this school that students might attach a *stigma* to receiving additional support. Both the Principal/SENCO and SEN Teacher alluded to this during their interviews,

'...the student was always late coming up to class [withdrawal]. I think a lot of it could have been him being embarrassed coming out. Some students are. Slowly but surely, that's improving.'

Equally, while the Principal here fostered an inclusive culture and clearly demonstrated a commitment to ‘*looking after*’ (P6) students, there was an awareness that parents ‘*are iffy about the withdrawal in 1st year. Very concerned that he’ll be targeted*’ (P6). Where does this stigma come from?

4.1.2 Challenges for schools

This section deals specifically with challenges related to whole-school approaches to inclusive and special education. Numerous codes were generated during analysis of data and the following categories emerged:

- Rapid evolution of inclusive education;
- Post-primary environment; and
- Economic recession.

Rapid evolution of inclusive education

The Irish educational landscape dramatically transformed in the past two decades in response to legislative moves towards inclusive education as outlined in Chapter Two. Such transformation has compelled schools to respond to increasing levels of diversity in classrooms. This has delivered challenges to schools. All schools indicated that their numbers of students with SEN had increased considerably in the past decade, with two Principals specifically reporting an increase in mental health concerns amongst students (P1 and P2). What emerged strongly from data was the subsequent lack of access to external supports, as represented by P1 when she said,

‘I think that over the years, when mainstream schooling started to become more

inclusive...that very often we are given a whole lot of responsibilities and maybe not the support to go with them. So while inclusivity I have no doubt is the way to go, it's the way we do things, sometimes it's a case of well.. .that's your problem now so deal with it. I know that very often the external agencies don't have the manpower or the capacity to deal promptly with problems...That puts our own SEN team under pressure.'

(P1)

Similarly, S5 gave an example of a 13 year old student in the school that could not be understood due to a severe articulation disorder. The student, despite being diagnosed at the age of five, had received no speech and language therapy,

'He was a victim of the system because of the embargo on covering. People [speech and language therapists] were out for years and they weren't replaced. Now he's too old.'

(S5)

Stories like this (and there were more) highlighted schools' frustration with the lack of a continuum of support beyond the school and acknowledged the need for external professional expertise.

Another challenge for schools related to the current model of resource allocation. Chapter One highlighted the flaws within the system and the forthcoming reforms. Four schools explicitly reported the issue of inflexibility in the current system of resource allocation and the subsequent inequity resulting from the necessity for a formal diagnosis:

'...making sure that they [students] are getting what they are entitled to or what they need, because sometimes students aren't actually entitled to anything but they need things, so that's really the biggest job.'

(S3)

The current imperative for formal diagnosis of disability has put enormous pressure on inadequately resourced external professional services tasked with undertaking formal assessments (P2; P6; S3; P1). Subsequently, the *commercialisation* of the assessment process,

whereby parents pay privately for psychological assessments has generated additional issues, the most obvious being the cost involved, which according to S2, can amount to €800 in some instances for one assessment. This has placed an enormous burden on parents.

However, another issue also emerged in relation to the commercialisation of assessments. In School E, the SENCO reported the challenges relating to applications for Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations (RACE) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) schemes. In this instance, S5 felt her professional judgement about the eligibility of certain students for RACE was undermined by privately conducted psychological assessments. She felt the students didn't meet the criteria, yet parents insisted on applying for RACE and DARE based on a professionally paid for psychological assessment,

*'The report said he was mildly dyslexic, but taking his English test, we couldn't find it. It wasn't there. I took his biology test, and it wasn't there. There were difficult words spelled really well. I got the history test, and I found more errors so that's what I used, there was an error rate so I sent it away wondering if they would accept it. I got a call from the mother asking "why you sent the history when I asked you to send the English. I want you to send it". So I had to send it, even though the history was the one that got it. **Did you explain that?** I did. She didn't care. That was her wish. She had taken expert advice. **She didn't take your expert opinion?** They don't regard it as an expert opinion. They badly need the spelling and grammar waiver for DARE.'*

(S5)

Much of the interpretation of this quote relates to what was *not* said. It suggests that perhaps S5 was questioning the integrity of the assessment process. It is possible that she believed that some parents were desperate to label their child in an attempt to make third level education more accessible. In any event, S5 did not feel her opinion was valued when parents were paying educational psychologists hundreds of euros to diagnose dyslexia in their children. The challenges reported by schools in responding to a rapidly transformed system of education not only created systemic issues at a macro level, but also challenged teachers in the classroom.

All schools reported increasing levels of diversity and spoke of the need for qualified SEN Teachers in addition to relevant whole staff CPD.

In addition to raising staff awareness and knowledge of SEN, five Principals in the study relayed the importance of having a qualified *expert* or team of *experts* to work with students with SEN and to advise, support and collaborate with Principals and teaching colleagues, as indicated by P3,

‘Well [S3] I see as the expert, she has all of the inside knowledge and all of that....She’s the leader here because she has the expertise and the qualifications. I have the understanding; she teaches me all the time’

(P3)

What is interesting here is the Principal’s use of the word *‘leader’*. Despite having no positional leadership role in the school (i.e. no POR), the SENCO is considered the leader because of her expert knowledge. This theme will be explored in greater detail in Section 5.3.

Every participant spoke of the imperative for suitably qualified *experts* in special education and the positive impact such expertise had in terms of leading inclusive approaches throughout the school, suggestive of a move towards developing special education as a profession perhaps. Notably, the single outlier school in the study was school F; the school was small and the Principal acted as the SENCO. At the time of interview, no teacher with a qualification in SEN was employed in the school, but for the first time a dedicated SEN Teacher was appointed. While the Principal demonstrated impressive understanding and awareness of the needs of the students with SEN, he acknowledged that when it came to specific evidenced based interventions to support the learning of students with more complex needs, some students were

being left behind. He also spoke of his frustration with the application process for additional resources through the NCSE and how, on several occasions, applications had been refused,

'The human element for SEN students is what it's all about. You have to look beyond the paperwork, when you see these guys coming into you. You know the parents, the background. You can't explain that on paper, like the parents are split up, or you know... child could have been abused....or in care.'

(P6)

I wonder if a qualified SEN Teacher would have the *language* and more importantly, the *expertise* to be able to identify, assess and label the needs in a way that one could '*explain that on paper*' (P6) and ultimately secure the resources. Equally, do students whom might be having a tough time at home need a diagnosis of SEN?

Post-primary environment

A challenge for schools, particularly larger school, was concerned with communication of information about the needs of students with SEN. This was referred to by three Principals and five SENCOs in the study. SENCOs spoke of the challenges involved in disseminating information about student profiles and IEP targets to all teachers. During interviews, all SENCOs shared some of the documentation they had generated (IEPs, student profiles, resources compiled for staff, SENCO calendars, school generated SENCO role descriptions etc.). The time and effort expended in generating these documents was recounted in SENCO interviews. However, three SENCOs conveyed a level of frustration about how this information was (or was not) used by subject teachers to inform their planning for teaching and learning (S2; S4; S5). There was a frustration that so much time and effort was committed to developing

systems to facilitate communication of such information, but teachers were not using it effectively.

The importance of ICT to facilitate effective and efficient dissemination of information about students was mentioned by all participants. All schools in the study had developed online systems (e.g. shared drives/networks) where information could be shared electronically. The Principal in School D, who had a keen interest in the use of ICT to support learning, but also to facilitate communication between staff conveyed this passion when he said,

'I am passionate about the influence ICT can play in making the professional work easier and more effective....We seem to be managing more information....The days of having a folder locked away in a locker in an office somewhere is gone. You need information at your fingertips.'

(P4)

Another key issue, which seems to be specific to the post-primary sector, relates to timetabling. The logistical challenges involved in creating staff timetables were unanimously reported in the study. Exacerbating factors linked to this challenge related to the numbers of teachers involved in the delivery of special education. In all except one school, numerous teachers were involved on a part-time basis. These ranged from three or four teachers in School F to close to sixty teachers in School A. School's C and D involved several subject teachers on a part-time basis. However, in two schools (Schools A and E), core, established SEN teams existed. In school B there was a smaller core team, but because the school's allocation of resource hours had reduced this year, there was a risk that one of the SEN Teachers, with expertise in mathematics, was going to lose his job.

Most SENCOs conveyed the challenges involved in matching teachers with students, particularly when it came to providing numeracy support for students. In five schools, SENCOs either devised the SEN timetables collaboratively with the Principals, or were given autonomy

to devise them. In School E, the Principal together with the Deputy Principal developed all timetables. However, during the interview with the SENCO, there was a sense that S5 wanted to be involved in the process. She reported how she had been '*campaigning very hard*' to have certain qualified staff involved on a more regular basis in the SEN department but was '*at the mercy of whoever is doing the timetable*' (S5).

Economic recession

The previous section made reference to timetabling challenges. Some of these relate directly to economic austerity which has forced schools to appoint greater numbers of teachers on part-time contracts. The Irish economy is seemingly in the midst of an economic recovery, following a catastrophic recession which saw public expenditure reduced through a series of austerity budgets since 2008. All participating Principals and SENCOs spoke of the implications of cumulative cutbacks in education in their schools, which can be summarised as:

- a reduction of 15 per cent in resource allocation for students with SEN;
- a deterioration in working conditions related to changes in terms of employment;
- depletion of middle-management posts of responsibility due to a moratorium
- increased casualisation of the employment market; and
- reduced support from Guidance Counsellors-this has since been partially restored with full restoration promised for September 2017 (Minister for Education and Skills, 2017).

All schools spoke of the challenges they faced in using diminishing and finite resources to support the needs of increasing numbers of students with SEN. The current model of resource allocation, as previously mentioned, is flawed. The amount of hours allocated to schools has been cut by 15 per cent in the past six years which, if considered in isolation may not seem

significant. However, two SENCOs and three Principals conveyed their frustration with what they considered an inadequate level of resourcing to support the demand in schools. Combined with a directive for full-time Guidance Counsellors to return to classroom teaching, the support and guidance structures in schools were significantly eroded, as conveyed by the Principal in School B when she said,

'The whole absence of guidance counselling...that was the biggest mistake of all time...there are so many kids that need different kinds of guidance and counselling'

(P2)

Similarly, P6, who for the first time was in a position to appoint a temporary full-time SEN Teacher declared,

'That's what I'm trying to do, get someone who is completely dedicated to resource. I don't want to be in a situation that I have to put her back into mainstream. Like the guidance. The guidance councillor is an integral part of SEN.'

(P6)

Four of the six SENCOs spoke of the important collaborative relationships they had developed with the Guidance Counsellors in their schools.

The cumulative impact of economic austerity measures has been felt in schools (P4 and S4; P2; P6 and S6). Permanent full-time teaching jobs are difficult to secure. Teachers are often appointed on a temporary basis with part-time hours. A common practice in five of the participating schools was to supplement part-time teachers contracted hours by allocating additional resource hours. The SEN Teacher in school F perceived that teachers,

'...go into it [SEN teaching] without really planning on going into it...it's the schools trying to fill up contracts...they do often find themselves picking up a few hours...that's really of no benefit to the student.'

(S6)

Two other SENCOs agreed with S6 in terms of the importance of consistency of staff involved in the delivery of SEN. The SENCO in School A, while having approximately sixty teachers involved in the delivery of SEN teaching, endeavoured to maintain consistency in terms of personnel working with specific students and had a core team of twelve qualified SEN Teachers, who mentored other teachers with fewer SEN teaching hours. However, two divergent views emerged in relation to scheduling large numbers of mainstream teachers to special education. The Principals in Schools A, B, E and F asserted the importance of involving mainstream subject teachers in the delivery of SEN as a way of raising awareness amongst staff, and encouraging all staff to take ownership of teaching and learning for students with SEN. They reported that it also afforded teachers an opportunity to experience teaching students with SEN in a different capacity and added to their '*suite of teaching methodologies*' (P1). Two Principals reported how this had subsequently instilled an interest in some teachers, who then decided to pursue postgraduate training in the area (P1 and P5). In contrast, the SENCOs in Schools B, C, D and the SEN Teacher in School F were of the view that involving many teachers on a casual basis in the delivery of special education wasn't efficient or effective use of resources. Reasons such as lack of expertise, inconsistency of approach, and administrative challenges related to timetabling, IEPs and management of staff were mentioned.

It was noted however, by most participants, that there were '*horses for courses*' (P2) and not all teachers were '*cut out*' (S1) for SEN teaching. Some Principals had actively encouraged

certain staff to get involved in special education, as conveyed by the Principal in School D, when he explained how the SENCO was appointed to the role,

‘...she is wonderful. I identified [S4] as someone who had a particular interest and capacity in this area at an early stage of the school’s development’

(P4)

Finally, a moratorium on middle-management Posts of Responsibility (PORs) in post-primary schools has triggered the destruction of this important leadership layer in schools. Table 4.2 illustrates the positions held by SENCOs in the study. The appointment of staff to PORs created tensions in two schools (B and C).

Table 4.2: *Post of responsibilities assigned to SENCOs*

SENCO	Post of Responsibility	Contact Teaching Hours
SENCO 1, School A	Assistant Principal Post for being SENCO (job sharing)	0
SENCO 2, School B	Assistant Principal Post for being SENCO	22
SENCO 3, School C	No Post	22
SENCO 4, School D	Assistant Principal Post for being SENCO and Year Head	19
SENCO 5, School E	Special Duties Post	18
SENCO 6, School F	Principal	0

In school D, the SENCO *doubled up* on her POR as she acted as the SENCO and year head, which *‘is a bit of a conflict of interest when you’re maybe advocating for students’* (S4) in a SENCO role, and having to act as a potential disciplinarian as year head. However, due to a moratorium on PORs, many are lost to the school if staff leave, and as a result, many Principals have had to rely on the good will of teachers to fulfil managerial roles, without any

remuneration or POR:

'I'm conscious all the time about the fact that she is doing this work, free...that does sort of bother me....it's not officially recognised'

(P3)

The Principal in School C conveyed a certain amount of guilt about the situation, but more so a level of frustration because the SENCO (S3) may never be appointed to a POR. The school enrolment numbers reduced over the years and therefore an excess allocation of PORs existed and were deemed '*over quota*' (P3). As a result, if a post holder retired or left the school, the post would not be refilled, despite a slight alleviation to the moratorium at post-primary level.

The appointment process for PORs in voluntary schools appears to give the Principal and Board of Management greater autonomy when deciding what role the POR should be allocated to. For example, both P2 and S2 described how the SENCO was appointed to her Assistant Principal position. Appendix C outlines the POR process and until recently, staff were appointed on a seniority basis. Now staff can be appointed on a meritocratic basis. However, has a change in policy infiltrated school culture and staff attitudes to POR appointment? Listening to the SENCO in school B would suggest that perhaps a tension can develop when teachers are appointed to a POR based on merit.

Prior to her appointment to Assistant Principal, S2 had already shared the role as SENCO alongside another colleague. A POR then became available in the school and staff, as a collective group decided that SEN coordination should be prioritised as a POR. Any member of staff could apply for the POR to become the SENCO. Interestingly, S2 was a past pupil of the school and was only teaching in the school a few years when the POR was advertised and said '*as a student here I have huge respect for seniority, everything has always worked that way here*' (S2). As a result, despite being one of the most suitably qualified for the role (and

doing the job alongside a colleague anyway!), reported that she *'didn't want to go for it at all'* (S2) as she didn't want to be *'stepping on toes'* (S2). When others expressed an interest in applying for the POR, S2 said she would have been *'happy to step down and still support the girls [students] emotionally'* (S2). However, S2 described how some staff (who perhaps were *next in line* for a POR) retreated when a job description, outlining the duties and responsibilities attached to the role was posted in the staffroom. When S2 was formally appointed as an Assistant Principal she asserted *'people were fantastic about it'* (S2) but also added *'initially people were saying "oh it's on merit now, how am I ever going to get a post"'* (S2). Data perhaps suggests that her appointment to a POR created a tension for S2 in dealing with some staff, whom she may perceive to be more deserving of a POR due to their senior status.

While S2 *broke the mould* in her school, the fact remained that the school had autonomy to do so. In ETB schools, the ETB holds the decision-making power in relation to the appointment of staff to PORs. In School C (an ETB school), both the Principal and SENCO conveyed their frustration with the appointment process, which in essence excluded P3 from the decision-making as recounted when he said,

'I won't be part of the appointment process, I think...and to what extent will I have a say in who's appointed? I don't know.'

(P3)

Both P3 and S3 explained how a *generic* appointment process exists, whereby the successful candidate, at the time of interview, does not know what additional management role they will have. While a merit based system exists in theory, considerable weighting is given for service to the school/ETB. The longer a teacher serves in the school, the more points they accrue at interview. The role is determined after interview from the list of priorities identified by the school which, according to S3 *'is a bit crazy because there is a very good chance that I will*

never get an A post.' As a result, a more senior candidate, without any qualification or expertise could be appointed to the SENCO role, which would mean the current SENCO, who is the only qualified SEN Teacher in the school and who currently fulfils the role voluntarily, would no longer be the SENCO.

In summary, schools' journeys towards developing inclusive education have been thwarted by significant systemic issues. The following section outlines findings related to the unique complexities attributed to the SENCO role. This theme cannot be treated in isolation and as such the previous section provides a contextual backdrop for understanding the complex nature of the role when striving to facilitate positive learning outcomes for students with SEN.

4.2 Complexities of the SENCO Role

This section will present findings relating to the complexities of the SENCO role and the challenges, tensions and dilemmas associated with role enactment as they relate to:

- Workload; and
- Lack of formal role recognition.

4.2.1 Workload

The IFS collected detailed information about the duties and responsibilities of SENCOs and concluded that SENCO workload was overwhelming and complex. While the current phase of the research asked SENCOs what the role involved, it was more concerned with understanding *why* the workload was so complex and sought to probe *how* this complex workload influenced SENCOs' professional lives. The vignette (Figure 4.2) gifted by the SENCO in School A encapsulates the complexity of the SENCO role and is perhaps analogous to a poisoned chalice.

Figure 4.2: *Vignette: What it feels like to be a SENCO*

'...it was volume of work. It was the fact that no matter what I did I never got on top of it. I kind of resented the fact that I was working so hard, and I loved the job, but my satisfaction was completely diminished... I had a brief that was not sustainable. And when I spoke to that woman [occupational health therapist], it was interesting, she was neutral, I explained what I was doing, and she said to me, "are you insane. That job will kill you". That's what she said, in plain English, and I was really cross then, but it was good to actually know that it wasn't my imagination....the outcomes were good. I had a very good relationship with parents, we were making a difference to kids, and I knew all that. In that sense I was positive about what I was doing, but the actual doing of it was killing me.... And for a job that doesn't exist. What struck me, this is terrible to say, I don't care I'm going to say it anyway, in the middle of all that, let's say I did one day come in here and just drop from a stroke or something, right? I thought, what they'll actually say to me at the end of all this is "why did you do it?" That was a lightbulb moment for me. I thought, they won't actually care. They will say "it's your fault. You did it. You had a choice". Even though I felt I didn't have a choice, I felt how could I walk away from those children. I did feel trapped. But, at the same time, that moment of thinking, after all this, that's what they're going to say, was so painful, well that's just such an eye-opener [gets upset]. [It] impacted on my health, on my social interactions in the school. It impacted everything. And I'm not moaning.' (S1)

Unsurprisingly, data from interviews with SENCOs reinforced findings from the IFS related to the complexity and volume of work attached to the role and the views expressed by S1, who asserted that she *'had a brief that was unsustainable'* (S1) accurately reflect the views of all participating SENCOs. Commonalities emerged across all sites in relation to the duties undertaken by SENCOs. Furthermore, all Principals demonstrated an acute awareness of and

appreciation for the work undertaken by SENCOs and comments such as *'I'd say [S3] does more than anybody else in the building'* (P3) and *'[S4] is one of the most important cogs in the operation of the school'* (P4) accurately reflect the views of Principals. Data suggest that key elements of the role may be categorised into three broad areas:

- administrative tasks: for example, report writing, applications for reasonable accommodations, timetabling;
- collaborative practice: for example, working with parents, external agencies and Principal, consultancy with colleagues; and
- teaching: working predominantly in withdrawal settings with individual students or small groups of students with SEN and also co-teaching arrangements.

Only two SENCOs in the study (S1 and P6) did not have any teaching responsibilities; S1 job shared and was contracted for 11 hours weekly (but worked 20 hours) in a school with 1400 students, while P6 was the Principal. All other SENCOs maintained considerable teaching loads ranging from 18 hours to a full teaching load of 22 hours. Three of the teaching SENCOs taught a mix of special education and mainstream subjects and liked the variety (S2, S4 and S5). Only one SENCO in the study was a full-time SEN Teacher (S3) and enjoyed this role. In School F, S6 also worked in a full-time SEN capacity but did not have any administrative duties assigned to SEN coordination other than collaboration with colleagues and record keeping and planning for her caseload. She reported that she enjoyed SEN teaching more than mainstream teaching and would be happy to work full-time in SEN.

While most SENCOs reported feeling challenged by the volume of work involved in SEN coordination and the subsequent pace of working, they also insisted that it hadn't always been the case and described how the role had expanded over the years. In School C, S3 spoke of her appointment to the school as a resource teacher eight years previously and explained how

‘...the coordinating bit of it just came with it...but the role has gotten bigger...just evolved into part of my role’

(S3)

Similarly, S5 declared herself to be *‘an accident in the school’* in that she had started her career in the school *‘a life-time ago’* as a remedial teacher in a special class where she was

‘...given the job to look after that class. Nothing else. And it has evolved and developed....so the bit of paperwork built up and up’

(S5)

What emerged strongly from SENCO data was the complexity involved with the workload.

The SENCO in School A articulated this clearly when she said,

‘In a way it’s probably a more difficult role than Deputy Principals because of...the detail of the disabilities. Every child you’re managing is unique. And every situation they bring to it is unique.’

(S1)

Interestingly, two SENCOs used the phrase *‘the devil is in the detail’* (S1 and S4) and all spoke of the time needed to plan for and support the individual learning needs of students with SEN, when no set curricula existed and SENCOs had to *‘make it up as I went along’* (S1). While there seemed to be *‘no beginning point and no end to it’* (S3), what struck me in my interactions with all SENCOs, was the *burden of responsibility* they felt in dealing with the human/relational nature of the role as conveyed by S1 when she said:

‘...the Department they really have no real understanding of what it is like to manage something like this and the responsibility of it, and the constant barrage of demands and detail and meetings with parents and people coming in here crying....Children bang their heads off walls, melting down in the corridor. It is an enormous job..... all those years that I’m in special needs, I haven’t had time to have a cup of tea.....it might be my own fault, maybe I took it too seriously, but how can you not? How can you walk away, like this is what they’re saying, don’t do this, but how can you walk away...the complexities are huge. How can you walk away from these kids and say “sorry, I don’t have the time”. You can’t. It’s not an easy one to say, “I’m going now and having a break”. I work all my breaks.’

(S1)

There was a real sense from data that SENCOs felt an overwhelming duty of care to students which weighed heavily on their shoulders, as portrayed by S4 when she said, *'If you don't keep on top of it [paperwork], it could affect somebody's future'* (S4). Similarly, the burden of responsibility felt by S5 was such that she strongly believed *'one person should not be left in any school doing this'* (S5). However, the views of all twelve participants coincided and strongly advocated for a team response to the challenges of inclusive special education. But will this be enough to alleviate the sense of responsibility felt by SENCOs? Data indicated that all Principals (except P6, who was the SENCO) considered their SENCOs to be the *experts* in special education and as a result were guided and advised by their *expert opinions*. The SENCOs in Schools A and C spoke of the support they found in having a *'knowledgeable other'* (S3) in the school to use as a *sounding board* and perhaps share some of the burden of responsibility:

'...without that [support from a colleague] I would feel very on my own with it all in a sense that you ultimately have to make the decision'

(S3)

Distributed approaches to leadership of special education were evident in most schools. In School F however, where the Principal was the SENCO, leadership of inclusive special education seemed to reside primarily within him but certain administrative tasks were delegated to other staff. For example, the Guidance Counsellor undertook all cognitive ability tests, Mathematics and English teachers administered numeracy and literacy assessments respectively with students.

Despite all SENCOs feeling supported in their roles by their Principals, being perceived as the knowledgeable *experts* caused SENCOs to feel very much alone in terms of decision-making

about the lives of some of the most vulnerable students in the school. Being perceived as the expert was somewhat of a burden in itself.

While the study sought to understand the implications of an excessive and complex workload on SENCOs professional lives, it was clear that the role also impacted on SENCOs personal lives. Five SENCOs reported having to work at home in the evenings to manage administrative tasks such as report writing, profiling, IEPs, completing RACE, DARE and NCSE applications and developing spreadsheets to track student progress (S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5). Two SENCOs made phone calls to parents at home in the evenings (S2 and S5) and S4 explained how, on several occasions she had met with or spoken to external agencies and parents outside of school hours. All SENCOs worked during the summer holidays to develop timetables, plan transitions for students transferring from primary schools, and develop student profiles and IEPs. The implications of such an onerous and time consuming role were such that S5 asserted,

'My children are grown up. Younger teachers would not want to do it. You couldn't do it if you had young children. Nobody will want to be a SEN coordinator.'

(S5)

Similarly, S1 articulated the sense of *personal* loss she felt in the role when she said,

'...that's something that made me really sad. That I've been in the school all these years and had so little social contact, because the job has been so demanding. I feel I have personally lost out.'

(S1)

She warned that *'when people don't have the support, the burn out must be huge. Eventually it's not sustainable'* (S1). Yet despite the professional and personal challenges experienced by SENCOs in fulfilling the role, all six were emphatic about the sense of job satisfaction they derived from their direct work with students, parents and colleagues.

One way to address the issue of workload might be to reduce SENCOs teaching load to allow more time for coordinating duties. However, when this was suggested to SENCOs during interviews reactions were mixed. Three teaching SENCOs (S2, S3 and S5) all strongly resisted the suggestion. Both S2 and S5 spoke of the *'buzz'* (S2) they got from teaching and according to S5, *'that's what I want to do. That's not a punishment, that's the reward'* (S5). Moreover, S3 also felt strongly that her contact with students and in-depth knowledge and awareness of their needs was critical to effectively fulfil her role, *'it's knowing the kids that makes you able to do what you do as a coordinator'* (S3) and was of the view that *'if you only coordinate it, you'd have lots of lovely shiny paperwork but you wouldn't know them'* (S3).

The non-teaching SENCO in School A, who coordinated provision for 300 students and 300 resource hours, in a school with 1400 students would perhaps disagree with this view. While S1 did not teach, much of her time was consumed with meeting students and their parents and it was evident from interviews with her and her Principal that she had developed close relationships with students. I think S1 and S3 would have an interesting conversation about the *'lovely shiny paperwork'* (S1) in School A! While S1 did not teach, she also spoke of the demands in trying to manage paperwork, but she had a dedicated SEN team, with whom she worked closely and developed impressive systems to facilitate communication and collaboration within the SEN team and moreover with all staff. Conversely, S3, while speaking positively of a whole-school collaborative approach to SEN, was the only SEN qualified teacher in the school and therefore took full responsibility for coordination of SEN tasks. She saw herself as *'the voice'* (S3) of the students (which required knowing them). While two very different perspectives emerged, both perceived their approaches to be effective.

In summary, data highlight the challenges associated with SENCO workload across all six schools. The role entails a significant volume of administration. However, a deeper analysis of

the duties assigned to the role revealed the complex nature of the work involved and the subsequent burden of responsibility felt by SENCOs. Despite Principals reporting the centrality of the SENCO role to whole-school provision for students with SEN, the role is not formally recognised in policy, and the issues arising from this have also added to the complexity of the role. The following section deals specifically with the impact of a lack of formal role recognition on SENCOs' conceptualisations of their roles and related practices in schools.

4.2.2 Lack of formal SENCO role recognition: A 'one man band' show

'I have battled my entire career doing a job that has no job description and it has created major stresses on occasion.'

(S1)

The SENCO role in the Irish context has blindly evolved in response to moves towards inclusive education in mainstream schools, as outlined in Chapters One and Two. As the quote illustrates, this has caused anxiety. Data suggest that a lack of formal recognition of the SENCO role at policy level has generated issues, which may be summarised as:

- Ambiguity relating to role interpretation;
- Lack of formal structures to support the role; and
- SENCO identity.

Ambiguity relating to role interpretation

The previous section discussed how the coordination aspect of the SENCO role evolved and increased incrementally over time for almost all SENCOs. It was perhaps *bolted on* to SENCOs' existing teaching roles. As a result, while similarities existed in relation to administrative duties across schools, variances relating to SENCO status/teaching hours and role within the school were evident. Table 4.1 illustrates variations across schools in relation

to responsibilities and contact teaching time. While cognisant of the contextual school-based factors such as school culture, school size, student population and proportion of students with SEN, a lack of formal recognition of the role has resulted in local interpretations of the role, with an admission that schools and SENCOs tended to *'make it up as you go along'* (S1). Data suggest that perhaps this isn't necessarily a bad thing as it offers schools the flexibility to interpret the role in a way that suits their context. Tensions emerged from data which, on one hand called for formal recognition of the role, but on the other hand suggested that any role formalisation would need careful consideration in the event that *'the poor person [SENCO] is hemmed in by more rules and paperwork'* (P2).

What materialised from SENCO data was anxiety attributed to a perceived lack of acknowledgement and understanding on the part of the DES about the magnitude of the role. Data suggest that this perceived lack of recognition at policy level fuelled SENCOs' anxiety and perhaps caused some SENCOs to question their own capabilities in managing the workload. There appear to be no boundaries to the role, the complex work involved has neither *'a beginning nor an end'* (S3) and *'if somebody comes to me struggling or crying I'm going to try to fit them in'* (S2). The role cannot be quantified in terms of hours (S5).

Furthermore, SENCOs reported being *'all things to all people'* (S1). Data exemplified the *relational* nature of the role; working directly with students, communicating with parents and external agencies, managing SEN Teachers and SNAs and collaborating with colleagues carried enormous responsibility. All SENCOs identified themselves as the *'go to'* (S2) person for special education in the school and all clearly articulated their commitment to their roles, as conveyed by S1 when she said *'you must always do your best to serve the needs...you don't sell your service short'* (S1), but she also added that such a commitment can leave one *'open to all kinds of exploitation'* (S1). The burden of responsibility, already discussed in the previous

section, not only makes it difficult for SENCOs to refuse the work, it also appears to expose SENCOs to exploitation from *'the powers that be [the policy-makers]'* (S1) who, according to all twelve participants have no real understanding of the complexity of the SENCO role.

Lack of formal structures to support the role

As the SENCO role is not formally recognised, the sense of isolation felt by SENCOs was perhaps heightened by the non-existence of formal internal and external support structures; *'they'd [DES] want to put supports in place because that's where the isolation comes'* (S1) because SENCOs tended to *'work in a vacuum'* (S1). Despite all SENCOs and the SEN Teacher reporting positively on the support received from the Principal, a lack of guidance about the role created a very *'fluffy and woolly'* (S3) system where SENCOs and Principals felt they were *'walking through fog'* (S3). Four participants made comparisons between the SENCO role and the role of the Guidance Counsellor (S1; P3; P4; P5). To qualify as a Guidance Counsellor, a postgraduate level qualification in guidance counselling is essential. To qualify as a SENCO a generic teaching degree is the only requirement. Guidance Counsellors are represented by a professional organisation with formal structures in place to facilitate professional learning and support amongst peers through monthly offsite network meetings. No such support exists for SENCOs, who, according to two Principals (P4 and P5)

'...need supports and Acts, group meetings, the same way Guidance Counsellors get together and have that support' (P5)

Like guidance counselling, the SENCO fulfils a unique role within the school (P4) and the importance of networking beyond the school with other SENCOs was articulated clearly in interviews:

'I met lots of younger teachers crying at meetings who were doing this job. I was lucky, I was older, I was saying look, I understand. I have lived this. They were delighted to have somebody saying I understand where you're coming from.'

SENCO Identity

Lack of formal recognition of the SENCO role has also interfered with SENCOs' capacity to form a solid SENCO identity. Six SENCOs had very different responsibilities as represented in Table 4.3, which in turn shaped their conceptualisations of the role. The table also illustrates their Principals' perspectives on the SENCO role. What is interesting to note are the subtle variations in perceived identities. Two SENCOs (S2 and S5) explicitly expressed their discomfort with being identified as *leaders*. While the topic of leadership will be explored in greater detail in Section 4.3 it is worth noting at this point as it is linked to identity. A comparative analysis of SENCO and Principal perspectives of the SENCO role illuminates how closely aligned both perspectives are. The word *expert* was unanimously used by all five Principals (because P6 was the SENCO) when describing their SENCOs. Expert knowledge emerged strongly from data as being synonymous with leadership in SEN.

All SENCOs strongly self-identified as advisers for staff whereby '*you guide them. You advise them. But you never tell them what to do*' (S5). However, while all SENCOs spoke of the complexities involved in advising colleagues and at times the need to challenge staff attitudes towards SEN, they all reported having found ways to navigate these sensitivities in ways that left mutual trust between SENCOs and their colleagues intact (most of the time). The SENCO in School D wondered if sometimes she was '*getting peoples' backs up*' (S4) when she was advocating for students with SEN. Data suggest that perhaps SENCOs require high levels of interpersonal skills to enable them to fulfil the role effectively.

Table 4.3: *SENCO responsibilities and perceived identities*

SENCO	Responsibilities	SENCO Perceived Identity	Principal Perspective
SENCO 1, School A	Part-time SENCO. No teaching duties.	Coordinator of SEN, administrator, manager, shared	Sees S1 as expert, SEN coordinator and 'shared leader' of SEN

		leader, collaborator, advisor, advocate, knowledgeable guide.	
SENCO 2, School B	Art teacher, SEN teacher, SENCO	Carer, SEN teacher, Art teacher, advocate, coordinator of SEN, administrator, advisor	Sees S2 as the expert, advocate, carer, SEN coordinator and shared leader
SENCO 3, School C	Full time SEN teacher, SENCO	SEN teacher, coordinator of SEN, administrator, leader, collaborator, advisor, advocate, expert in SEN	Sees S3 as the expert, SEN coordinator, collaborator, leader of SEN
SENCO 4, School D	French teacher, SEN teacher, SENCO and Year Head	SEN teacher, French teacher, coordinator of SEN, administrator, leader, expert, advisor, advocate	See S4 as expert, SEN coordinator, advisor, advocate, shared leader
SENCO 5, School E	SEN teacher, History teacher, SENCO	SEN teacher in special class and mainstream, History teacher, coordinator of SEN, administrator, advocate, knowledgeable guide, advisor, collaborator	Sees S5 as expert, SEN coordinator, administrator, advocate, collaborator
SENCO 6, School F	Principal, SENCO, secretary!	Principal, leader, figurehead, adviser and contact for parents, SEN coordinator and administrator, advocate	N/A

Certain commonalities amongst SENCO attributes emerged from interviews with both Principals and SENCOS. Table 4.4 summarises the key attributes of participating SENCOS with illustrative comments. What was consistently reported by Principals was the level of dedication, passion, drive, and professional expertise possessed by their SENCOS. All five Principals conveyed enormous respect for their SENCOS and trusted them implicitly. What emerged from interview data with SENCOS was the importance of advocacy to their role; facilitating student voice, enabling learning, challenging staff attitudes and raising awareness amongst staff were reported as important by all SENCOS. Equally important seemed to be the types of relationships they developed with students; they reported being trusted confidantes for students, supporting them emotionally and demonstrating empathy and understanding of their needs.

Table 4.4: *SENCO attributes*

Attributes	Illustrative Comments
Possess expert knowledge	<p><i>'I have to read up all that file before they come in. I have to be there meeting the parentAnd for 40 minutes when I'm talking to them, my mind is working constantly in analysis, you know? Explaining. A lot of times they get assessments done, they're not explained to them. When they come into me, I'm the person going through it' (S1)</i></p> <p><i>'I would be associated with a level of expertise' (S5)</i></p>
Empathic	<p><i>'It really is hectic, like if you think it's busy for you as a teacher, what do you think it's like for the student' (S4)</i></p>
Generous/kind	<p><i>'I suppose [S1] has such a wisdom and gentle way that very often she gets sucked into dealing with problems on a very individual level, she could spend a lot of time trying to sort out a difficulty a student might have' (P1)</i></p> <p><i>'I choose not to do walkabout here because I want to be available if students who need to talk to you, and there are always students who need to talk to you' (S2)</i></p>
Courageous	<p><i>'I get the perception of "oh here she goes again." I'll always advocate for the student' (S4)</i></p>
Compassionate/ Caring	<p><i>'We're fortunate in this school that we have an excellent SENCO. She genuinely cares about the students' (P4)</i></p> <p><i>'I like the caring aspect of it. When you have a small group of students you build up a better rapport.' (S6)</i></p> <p><i>'The human element for SEN students is what it's all about.' (P6)</i></p>
Team player/collegial/ collaborator	<p><i>'Everybody on the team.....we get on really well. You know, there's no frictions, no tensions, we all support each other totally' (S1)</i></p> <p><i>'I found because we worked more as a team, it certainly improved the system' (S1)</i></p> <p><i>'I try to work with the teachers.' (S6)</i></p>
Communication skills	<p><i>'She keeps me and the deputies involved. There's a communication structure...and her team have set up with everybody' (P1)</i></p>

Organisational skills	<i>'I think that the fact she is so organised, the fact, first of all, is that she is so tuned in.... I can actually safely go home in the evening, knowing full well that whatever needs to be done for a SEN, is being done' (P3)</i>
Passionate, driven, committed	<i>'Her [S5] commitment is above and beyond a job. It's nearly a vocation that she has' (P5)</i> <i>'She genuinely cares about the students. It's her drive and her enthusiasm for ensuring that we provide the best possible outcomes which is a huge support to me in terms of the school's reputation' (P4)</i>
Advocate/ facilitative of student and parental voice	<i>'I feel that my job is to make that child's life easier while they're here...if it means I speak to a teacher when they would say, "Miss she's getting cross with me", I'd approach the teacher and say "she's going through a bad space at the moment, is there any chance"' (S2)</i> <i>'Yeah, any of the ones with special needs, if they get into trouble, they come to me' (P4)</i> <i>'The students have huge input here because it's that kind of school' (S1)</i>
Reflective practitioner	<i>'I'd leave a suggestion box by the door. The only way we learn is from the students.... the only way I'll learn is in them evaluating what I do' (S2)</i>
Good listener/trusting/ approachable	<i>'I think they [teachers] trust me. Very much so. They come to me the whole time' (S5)</i> <i>'They [students] can trust and confide in you' (S2)</i> <i>'I trust [S1] completely in her role' (P1)</i> <i>'I'm soft and they know that. In that, I'm approachable. I'm not the cross teacher' (S2)</i>
Respect for others	<i>'I would have a huge regard for the people I work with. It's not based on anything other than I have a huge regard for them' (S1)</i>
Dedication	<i>'I often think if she were to retire, how do you define her role? Nobody else would do that job like she does. She is unique in the way she does it. It's about her own passion and love of the whole thing and the personal interest in it' (P5)</i>
Innovative/ dynamic	<i>'it's about constantly looking for ways to move the school forward and to be innovative, to inform people' (S3)</i>

	<i>'I've been putting systems in constantly, reviewing them and changing them' (S1)</i>
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A summary of the complexities of the SENCO role in this study attests to the workload involved, but moreover, to the burden of responsibility felt by SENCOs in navigating through complex work which was highly collaborative and relational in nature. Exacerbated by a lack of formal recognition of the role, SENCOs spoke of the isolation felt when carrying this burden of responsibility. It emerged that SENCOs worked in a *vacuum* devoid of any external supports to guide them in their roles, which in turn perhaps added to the sense of isolation. Furthermore, SENCOs conceptualisations of their role, while displaying similar characteristics, were subtly nuanced, particularly when identity was linked to leadership. The following section will present findings related to the theme of leadership in SEN, where perhaps the greatest degree of variation in data emerged.

4.3 Leadership in Inclusive Special Education

An exploration of leadership in inclusive special education guided the direction of this study. Consensus in the literature exists when arguing the centrality of leadership in driving whole-school approaches to inclusive special education. An exploration of leadership in this study focused on leadership from SENCOs, but also examined how Principals' leadership approaches supported SENCOs in their efforts to lead inclusive special education. This section will explore the impact of leadership on schools' capacities to respond to inclusive special education and lead change initiatives. Two broad categories and their associated sub-themes emerged:

- Leadership approaches:
 - SENCOs as leaders- 'authority of expertise'
 - Distributed leadership and the impact of a POR

- Principal leadership for inclusive special education
- Leading and managing change: The importance of learning organisations

4.3.1 Leadership approaches

Distributed models of leadership are endorsed by policy in post-primary schools in Ireland, and are taken to mean those carrying a positional post of responsibility (POR). However, this study adopted a broader definition of distributed leadership as outlined in Chapter One and considered the potential for SENCOs to assume leadership roles irrespective of a POR. What emerged forcefully from data, particularly from interviews with Principals, was the connection between leadership and expertise. The following section presents an account of both Principals and SENCOs associations with leadership and what Bush (2008) calls *authority of expertise*.

SENCOs as Leaders: Authority of Expertise

All twelve participants in the study unanimously spoke of the necessity for expert knowledge pertaining to SEN to fulfil the SENCO role. Furthermore, SENCOs were seen as the *go to* person in the school and therefore a level of expertise was considered imperative to facilitate this advisory role, as asserted by S3 when she said,

'You are the expert in the school, let's say, if you don't know then who does? So, it's your role to advise people on that. I mean, in terms of the Principal, he would definitely say it's my role to advise him.'

(S3)

This expertise was not only attributed to the knowledge and experience of SENCOs, but was also enhanced by having formal postgraduate qualifications relevant to special education. It was evident from data that all participants had an appreciation for the level of expertise required to effectively execute the SENCO role. All twelve considered specialist qualifications essential rather than desirable prerequisite criteria. Of the six SENCOs in the study, five held

postgraduate level qualifications relevant to SEN. Two SENCOs had graduated in recent years from the DES funded *Combined Postgraduate Diploma in SEN* (PGDSEN) and explicitly commented on the sustainability of the CPD and relevance of the course to their role.

All SENCOs asserted the importance of having knowledge about students with SEN and specialist skills to support them in their advisory role and more importantly in their teaching role,

'If you're bringing out a child from a class at one time, and you ask a teacher not qualified at resource to teach them, and advise them on what to do, how do you say to them, what was the target and how was it made? What was the improvement? I don't think that's possible.'

(S5)

The necessity for specialist knowledge and expertise was echoed by the SEN Teacher (S6) in School F, who had applied, with the support of her Principal, to undertake the Postgraduate Diploma in SEN. Unfortunately due to the limited number of places available each year, she was unsuccessful in her application despite meeting application criteria.

The sixth SENCO was the Principal (P6) and while he did not hold a postgraduate qualification relevant to SEN, he believed he had the leadership and management skills necessary to coordinate special education provision in his school and delegated other tasks such as undertaking assessment to other staff. Furthermore, he believed the Principal should be the leader of special education and insisted that,

'If you have a staff and they see a Principal who has no interest in SEN and has passed on the role to someone, like that's not good leadership to me....the Principal leads the way, this is how we deal with it. They'll [staff] take it a bit more seriously.'

(P6)

While it was possible for P6 to know all 170 students in his school, he did acknowledge that this was improbable in larger schools, and recognised the need to distribute leadership throughout the school. Nevertheless, he did insist that Principals, even in larger schools, had

key roles to play in leading the school's approach to inclusive special education. All five Principals considered their SENCOs to be the experts in SEN and because of this, considered them joint leaders of SEN, as illustrated by P1 when she said,

'[Leadership] is shared. She [S1] spearheads it, but there is an expectation on everybody to be involved.....But she's the coordinator. She guides us.' (P1)

The Principal in School C believed the SENCO (S3) to be the leader of SEN for the school when he said,

'She's the leader here because she has the expertise and the qualifications. I have the understanding, she teaches me all the time.' (P3)

Interestingly, the SENCOs themselves had somewhat mixed views about their roles as leaders. Two SENCOs did not believe themselves to be leaders of SEN, and went as far as to resist the notion (S2 and S5), as illustrated by S2 when she said,

'I don't want the title of leader by any means...a leader, for some reason, it's a term I'm not comfortable with.' (S2)

In this instance, I sensed that perhaps leadership held strong associations with support and advocacy for students. Similarly S5 declared, *'I don't like the word leader'* and when asked why, she had an interesting perspective as exemplified in the following dialogue:

*'Think of the leaders you know. They were either dictators or they were silly people that thought they knew more than everybody else. **What about Mary Robinson?** Ah she inspired, she never led. She had no power.'* (S5)

I interpreted from data that perhaps S5 associated leadership with power, and possibly believed she had little power. As discussed in Section 4.1.2 she mentioned her desire to have greater input in devising timetables and determining how resources were distributed. Furthermore, later in the interview when asked whether her colleagues believed she was the leader in SEN she replied,

'I would be associated with a level of expertise....I would hope that I inspire people. They [teachers] treat my job with respect. They feel I have knowledge and experience.'
(S5)

What was interesting about this interview, which was corroborated by her Principal (P5), was the reputation S5 had in the school. She was evidently admired and respected by colleagues and self-identified as the person colleagues sought out for advice and support. Colleagues listened to S5 and took on board her advice. Data from interviews with both S5 and her Principal suggest that she had significant *influence* in the school, despite her own belief that perhaps she had little power. But isn't an ability to *influence* considered a form of *power*, which ultimately involves *leadership*? Both SENCOs considered themselves advisers, supportive of colleagues' efforts to include students with SEN, and moreover, were strongly committed to their roles as SEN Teachers, working with students.

The remaining four SENCOs (S1, S3, S4 and P6) were comfortable with the mantle of *leader* but varied in their perceived interpretations of leadership in SEN. While all four insisted that leadership in SEN was strongly connected with a level of expertise, they also recounted the importance of advocacy, as illustrated by S4 when she said, '*if they [students] get in trouble, they come to me. That's expected.*' S4 believed that leadership in SEN equated to,

'...knowing what is happening and what current practice is. What should be happening, what is expected...and then making sure it is happening in the school.'
(S4)

According to S3, leadership in SEN involved '*constantly looking for ways to move the school forward...to inform people*' (S3).

For P6, who was also the SENCO, leadership in SEN was concerned with being the figurehead in the school. He believed his relationship with parents of students with SEN was paramount and felt that his role as school Principal, and also SENCO, afforded reassurance to parents.

Distributed Leadership and the Impact of a POR

In the six participating schools, five SENCOs held positional distributed leadership roles. One SENCO (P6) was the Principal and the only SENCO to hold a senior management position. The four remaining SENCOs with PORs held either Assistant Principal or Special Duties posts, which comprise middle-management in schools. The remaining SENCO (S3) held no POR.

Unanticipated tensions emerged from data in relation to POR status. While all twelve participants spoke of the need to elevate the SENCO role to management level in schools, two SENCOs who held Assistant Principal posts spoke of the perceived barrier it created. For S2, acquisition of the POR was a recent accomplishment, prior to which she shared the SENCO role with a colleague. However, she recounted how,

'I was getting paid for it [POR], it wasn't fair to expect [her colleague] to do anything. I didn't think it was fair. It was fine when you weren't getting paid, but I'm not asking her to take work home with her.'

(S2)

Similarly, S4 held reservations about delegating what she perceived to be SENCO tasks to other SEN Teachers and declared, *'it's a post, I don't know if I can be asking people to do it'* (S4). This tension is perhaps intensified by SENCOs insistence that no single person should be responsible for coordination of SEN, as conveyed in Section 4.2.1. Moreover, while S4 spoke of her reluctance to delegate tasks, she also added that if she didn't have a POR,

'...it would be dreadful and soul destroying. Going on the goodwill of others. They wouldn't have to take it on.'

(S4)

There was a perception amongst all participants that allocation of a POR to the SENCO role would and did elevate the significance attributed to special education and furthermore provided some recognition at school level of the importance of the role.

The SEN Teacher in School F (S6) also believed the SENCO role should come with a POR as it would *'give the role the status it deserves'*. She was in the unusual position of being the only dedicated SEN Teacher in her school, where her Principal acted as SENCO. She believed that while her Principal was an enormous support to her and advocated strongly for students with SEN, allocating a POR to a member of staff would increase capacity within the SEN team *'and help with bouncing ideas off each other'* (S6).

All participating SENCOs and their Principals insisted that the role should carry a mandatory POR in order to recognise the magnitude of the role. Two Principals (P3 and P5) also spoke of the importance of additional remuneration for SENCOs considering the work involved. The only SENCO who did not hold a POR was S3. While she did believe she had acquired a level of status and recognition in her role, she attributed this to her level of expertise, but moreover, to the support she received from senior management. Her Principal was relatively new to the school and prior to his appointment, she felt that SEN was not prioritised in the past, and despite her own determination to formalise procedures in her school, it had little impact until recently. Notwithstanding the support from senior management, she did insist that,

'...part of the management team should have somebody who is the voice of the SEN on it, and there isn't. That's not to say that the management don't believe in SEN...But, there isn't somebody who is solely coming at it from that perspective.'

(S3)

Unfortunately for S3³, acquiring a POR may never be realised under the current system as outlined in section 4.1.2.

³ In February 2017 S3 was appointed to an Assistant Principal position in her school as SENCO!

Principal Leadership Supporting Inclusive Special Education

This study did not seek to explore Principals' leadership styles in totality. It sought their perspectives on leadership as it related to inclusive special education. It also sought to explore *how* these perspectives may have influenced SENCOs' capacity (for better or worse) to fulfil the role.

What emerged powerfully from data was the importance Principals attributed to inclusive special education. For all Principals, it was seen as a fundamental principle upon which schools were founded. All Principals spoke of the necessity to include all students as it reflected diversity in society as conveyed by P4 when he said,

'...to have an inclusive school that reflects society, it is a benefit to everybody. And I think that to have an inclusive school where you cater to all needs is an extremely healthy dynamic for everybody.'

(P4)

However, not only did all Principals convey a positive attitude towards inclusive special education, they all demonstrated a commitment to creating schools which endeavoured to '*look after*' (P6), students with SEN and gave priority to special education provision. Evidence of Principals' commitment to SEN was recounted by SENCOs in the study. The five SENCOs and SEN Teacher in School F spoke of the support they received from their Principals. Special education '*is constantly on the agenda*' (S4) and SENCOs felt happy with the level of support they received from their Principals and senior management, as illustrated by S6 when she declared,

'I am supported. He's very supportive. He said if there's anything else I need to come to him course-wise, the door is open. That's all you really need at the end of the day, a Principal that is supportive.'

(S6)

It was evident from data that Principals were committed to inclusive special education. In all schools, such commitment was translated into practice in the following ways:

- commitment to facilitate CPD for SENCOs, SEN teams and all staff and evidence of same having occurred;
- inclusion of SEN related information and issues at staff meetings-recurring agenda item;
- principals elevating SENCO status-providing a platform for SENCOs to consult with colleagues and advise/lead inclusive special education;
- insofar as possible, finding time for SENCOs and SEN teams to plan, collaborate and complete administrative tasks;
- ‘inclusion proofed’ policies-all schools had policies (e.g. SEN/Inclusion/Admissions/Enrolment/Assessment) which were cognisant of the diverse needs of all students and explicitly outlined how the school catered for students with SEN;
- evidence from SENCOs-SENCOs clearly articulated how their Principals supported them in their role. Data evidenced positive professional relationships, founded on trust and mutual respect, between Principals and their SENCOs; and
- data also provided evidence of Principal’s knowledge, understanding and awareness of policy and practice related to inclusive special education.

Principals’ commitment to inclusive special education seemed to impact positively on SENCOs’ capacity to influence and share leadership of whole-school change. The next section presents findings related to the dynamics of change management in participating schools.

4.3.2 Leading and managing change: The importance of learning organisations

This thesis was concerned with exploring how schools responded to change, and moreover, how such change was led and managed. Transformational approaches to leadership were considered an ideal bedfellow to collaborative practice in schools. Therefore, this section looked for evidence in data of transformational leadership and its role in developing schools as ‘learning organisations’ (Senge, 1998).

Transformational leadership

Much of the current literature relevant to leadership in education is preoccupied with the development of collaborative, distributed leadership approaches as discussed in Chapter Two. Key practices associated with transformational leadership, as evidenced in data included Principals and SENCOs abilities to:

- *Motivate staff*: foster commitment to shared vision and goals; maintain high expectations; communicate direction; develop relationships;
- *Develop people (capacity build)*: provide individualised support; model inclusive values and practices; support and resource professional learning;
- *Design collaborative systems*: facilitate collaborative practice within the school; build productive relationships with families and communities; link the school to the wider community; and
- *Improve the teaching and learning environment*: appoint suitably qualified staff; provide instructional support; foster cultures of learning; monitor progress ; and align resources.

Motivating staff

Relationships between Principals and their SENCOs appeared to be built upon solid foundations of shared vision, mutual respect, trust and understanding. In all schools (except

School F, where the Principal was the SENCO) Principals spoke of their unwavering admiration for and belief in their SENCOs, and the commitment, pride and enthusiasm with which they undertook the role. In all schools, leadership of SEN seemed to vary. In schools B and C, the Principals and SENCOs worked closely together on a regular basis. Both SENCOs were perceived as the experts in SEN and Principals sought their advice and direction regularly. In School A, P1 spoke of her trust and confidence in her SENCO and, like all Principals in the study, considered the SENCO an expert. Comparative analysis of data from Principals and SENCOs in each school demonstrated the mutual respect, support and trust both felt towards each other and P3 accurately represented the views of all Principals when he said,

'...I can actually safely go home in the evening, knowing full well that whatever needs to be done for a SEN, is being done. And if it's not being done there's a reason for it...and [S3] will tell me that....I think we have a very good working relationship there, that we can support each other.'

(P3)

Similarly, SENCOs reported positively on the support, trust and respect they felt from their Principals, and moreover, the understanding and awareness Principals had of the complexity of their role. Comments like, *'I feel backed up'* (S4) and *'I would be hugely supported by her [Principal]'* (S2) were representative of how SENCOs felt about their Principals.

Develop people and build capacity

In all schools, both Principals and SENCOs conveyed their commitment to professional learning and the importance of CPD specific to inclusive special education. Five SENCOs (all except P6) held postgraduate qualifications in SEN.

There was evidence in data that Principals were committed to developing *levels* of expertise relevant to inclusive special education, ranging from specialist expertise within the SEN team to subject teacher competence in inclusive pedagogical approaches such as differentiation and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). In the first instance, developing capacity within the SEN teams was considered essential by all Principals and SENCOs. In all schools, except School F, discreet SEN teams existed, varying in size and level of qualification. In School F however no team existed but efforts to develop expertise were underfoot. In his joint leadership role as Principal and SENCO, P6 coordinated a universal approach to SEN provision: the Career Guidance teacher administered cognitive ability tests; Maths teachers undertook maths screening tests; English teachers administered literacy screening assessments; all teachers were encouraged to differentiate lessons. The first dedicated SEN Teacher had been appointed to the school that year, and yet, P6 spoke of the challenges associated with making mainstream teaching and learning accessible to students with more complex needs. Furthermore, he spoke of the perceived lack of relevance of some CPD when inviting experts or support services in to the school from outside, stating *'it can be too general'* (P6). While a universal approach was adopted in the school, data suggest that perhaps it wasn't enough. A lack of SEN specific expertise made it difficult for the school to provide more individualised and contextualised CPD targeted at meeting the needs of students with complex SEN, as recounted by P6 when he said,

'...when I read psychology reports and the recommendations they make, some of the resources, they're very specific, like Mavis Beacon...Some teachers would be like, "well do I have to learn it?"

(P6)

Principals in all other schools spoke of the importance of using school-based expertise within SEN teams to cascade CPD to all staff. In four schools (A, C, D and E), facilitation of in-house CPD was considered preferential to invited speakers as it was felt expertise resided within the

school, collaborative relationships existed between colleagues, and more to the point, staff delivering CPD had an understanding of the CPD needs and the context. In effect, such an approach to capacity building at school level reinforces the need for specialist knowledge and expertise. In school E for example, P5 asserted she had *'a staff full of experts'* who were assigned to various curricular projects and were supported to develop expertise in these areas. At staff meetings, these *'curriculum leaders'* (P5) delivered CPD to all staff by way of presentations or interactive *'pop-up workshops'* (P5). Her views were representative of most Principals when she said, *'There's no point in sending someone away and there's only one person trained. You have to filter that out'* (P5).

Three SENCOs (S1, S3, S4) reported that they had delivered whole staff CPD and were comfortable about doing so. Two were uncomfortable with the idea (S2, S5) but did say they had delivered information sessions to staff. The SENCO in School E, while considered the expert on special education in the school, preferred to advise colleagues individually as and when they sought support. She did not feel comfortable with providing whole staff CPD as she believed,

'...the teacher knows exactly the problem better than I do...I'm not the expert. The expert is in the classroom. You guide them, you advise them, you listen but you never tell them what to do.'

(S5)

In School F, P6 regularly discussed SEN at staff meetings, but this platform was used to communicate information rather than provide opportunities for collaborative professional learning in SEN.

The importance of mentoring of colleagues was evident in SENCO data. In all schools SENCOs (and the SEN Teacher in School 6) spoke of their role in mentoring new and part-

time Teachers in SEN and advising and guiding them in their roles. All SENCOs considered this an important aspect of the role.

Designing collaborative systems

Specific questions in the interview schedules for both Principals and SENCOs sought information about whole-school systems in place to support collaborative practice and facilitate communication. System-wide approaches varied in as much as school contexts varied.

In all six schools SEN teams existed and comprised various staff members as illustrated in Table 4.5. In four schools, scheduled meetings were recognised as part of teachers contact time. In the two remaining schools, while meetings were not recognised as teachers’ contact time, they were timetabled, and as the Principal in School E asserted *‘once something is timetabled it happens’* (P5). For Principals not involved in SEN team meetings, they were kept informed by receiving minutes of meetings. All Principals demonstrated interest and involvement in decision-making related to SEN provision and strong informal lines of communication existed between Principals and SENCOs, as reported by all participants.

Table 4.5: *SEN Team Meetings*

School	SEN Team Profile	Scheduled Meeting	Recognised working hours
A	Support teachers & SENCO	Weekly	Yes
B	Support Teachers, Principal SENCO and Year Head	Core team of support teachers & SENCO weekly/others as needed	No

C	Support Teachers, Home School Liaison Teacher, Deputy Principal and SENCO	Monthly but also a Student Support Team meets weekly	Yes
D	Principal, SENCO & SNAs	Weekly	Yes
E	Support Teachers, Deputy Principal, Guidance Counsellor and SENCO (occasional attendance from teacher in ASD class)	Weekly	Yes
F	Support Teachers, Guidance Counsellor and Principal (SENCO)	Weekly	No

Other systems existed at a whole-school level to communicate information to staff. Examples included:

- SEN was a standing agenda item at staff meetings (all schools);
- SEN was a standing agenda item at subject department meetings (Schools A; C; D and E);
- IT was universally used as a platform to share information about students with SEN (all schools); and
- Student profiles were generated and disseminated to all staff (either in hard copy or electronically) (all schools).

SENCOs spoke of systems in place to coordinate and organise administration attributed to the role. They developed different approaches to its management, which in many ways was influenced by the contexts in which they worked. School A, which had a student population of 1400, unsurprisingly, had significantly more systems in place to coordinate more than 300 SEN hours. S1 had twelve dedicated SEN Teachers, with four designated to coordinate SEN for

different year groups. Systems were formally established and embedded in this school and ranged from referral systems for SEN screening and assessment, to communicating with external agencies and parents. One system they had recently developed was to set aside an entire day offsite for the SEN team to review, evaluate, and strategically plan the SEN Departmental Plan for the following year. S1 reported how the Principal had encouraged the team to take a full planning day in a local hotel. This required substantial resourcing but S1 reported the benefits of the day in relation to team building and productivity. She showed me the plan which had been developed on the day with clearly identified strategic objectives for the SEN Department.

In contrast, School F was a small school with less than 200 students, twelve students with diagnosed SEN and twenty teachers. The Principal (P6) spoke of the school's informal approach to collaboration and communication. An 'open door' (P6) policy existed where parents could contact the Principal directly and informally. As the SENCO in the school, P6 described himself as the figurehead for SEN, taking sole responsibility for communicating with parents and external agencies such as the NCSE and National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS). He believed this to be an important part of his role as it offered consistency and reassurance to parents, and also made SEN easier to coordinate, as recounted when he said,

'....they [parents of children with SEN] don't want any ambiguity. They want to be sure I understand what is required. They don't want to be meeting this or that teacher.'
(P6)

The dedicated SEN Teacher in School F (S6) had been in position for one academic year only and as such was still establishing herself in the school. However, she indicated her desire to have more contact with parents of students with SEN on her caseload and reported that she had never made direct contact with parents. She believed it was not within her current remit as her Principal acted as the key contact for students with SEN.

In all six schools, systems were considered important to facilitate a coordinated whole-school approach to SEN and manage administrative duties. In School D, ICT was well developed and all teachers had access to iPads or iMacs. Communication between staff on a daily basis was primarily conducted via email. Information about students with SEN was compiled in an iBook by the SENCO and was available on the server in a dedicated SEN folder. While S4 indicated that significant time and effort were invested in creating the iBook, she felt that the system and colleague's use of the resource needed further embedding in practice. However, SENCOs in all schools reported that development of systems was ongoing and there was awareness that current systems needed to be firmly embedded in school practice before new systems could be established. In School C, S3 accurately reflected the views of most SENCOs when she talked about systems development in her school:

'...once you implement a system then, it can be followed.. But you have to have a system in place and that's the missing bit. We have a system now for testing, we have a routine procedure for testing, it's timetabled every year, we know when it's going to happen....next step now is [to develop] a system for evaluating... we are almost at the point now of saying "right, everything else is fine, it's running smoothly, let's go to the next stage"'.

(S3)

While variations in the amount and type of systems existed between schools, there were also similarities in relation to systems developed around core SENCO tasks. For example, all SENCOs developed systems needed to meet important submission/completion deadlines for certain tasks such as: applications for RACE; applications to NCSE for allocation of additional support hours; transition planning; screening and assessment of students; formulation of IEPs. A common SENCO calendar emerged from SENCO interview data. In School B, the SENCO (S2) had created a personalised SENCO calendar with details of scheduled and repeated monthly SENCO tasks. It was a simple but effective template and mapped key tasks to their associated deadlines. This SENCO's level of organisation was impressive and all SENCOs and the SEN Teacher in School F conveyed excellent organisational skills when sharing

documentation and examples of systems developed to support administrative duties. While it was not within the remit of this study to analyse paperwork, SENCOs did share some of the bureaucratic systems they had developed in order to manage the administrative workload.

The role of parents as key stakeholders in the education of their children with SEN emerged powerfully from data. In all schools, every participant spoke of the importance of developing relationships with parents, and discussed the centrality of their role without any prompting or explicit questioning. Various formal systems were established at school level to facilitate parental involvement. For example, in School A, any student being referred for further school based assessment automatically required two face-to-face meetings with parents; one at the beginning of the referral process, and another at the end. In School A, S1 reported that she had received 50 new referrals that academic year, which resulted in 100 meetings for parents. In school D, the Principal (P4) offered another example of parental involvement when he discussed the decision-making process the school had worked through in changing the length of class time from 40 to 50 minute classes. In addition to staff consultation, parents were given a voice and were involved in the decision-making. All SENCOs reported spending significant amounts of time communicating with parents, either over the phone or in face-to-face meetings. There was an awareness and sensitivity amongst all participants of the benefit of having a designated, named person in the post-primary school for parents of children with SEN to be able to contact.

In terms of developing links within the wider community, all SENCOs-despite reporting poor access to external supports-communicated with external agencies such as the NCSE, NEPS, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Speech and Language Therapy Services and Occupational Therapy. S4 was a member of a SENCO Forum in her region and spoke of how helpful the network was in terms of supporting her in the role. Another spoke of

an impromptu network which had developed when the school's designated NEPS Educational Psychologist brought together some other SENCOs in the region for CPD (S5). While no longer in existence, she spoke of the enormous support she derived from the meetings and the subsequent networking it facilitated. Despite some (albeit limited) opportunities to network with other schools, most SENCOs and their Principals spoke of the need for a formal professional network for SENCOs.

Improve the teaching and learning environment

Four schools in the study were managed by the ETB and staff seemed to have access to various ETB coordinated initiatives which focused on developing teaching and learning. Three Principals (P1, P3 and P4) specifically spoke of the ETB research-based initiatives developed to support them in their roles. One such initiative, '*Instructional Leadership Programme*', had been availed of in Schools A and C. It was a nationwide professional development initiative focused on enhancing teaching and learning repertoires amongst teachers and encouraged teachers, through collegial and network support, to consciously modify their instructional practices. It placed pedagogy at the heart of leadership in schools. Another initiative in School A, involved eight teachers in a pilot project on peer observation of teaching which was developed by the National Association of Principals and Deputies (NAPD) to lead learning through professional collaboration in schools.

In essence, there seemed to be a dynamic culture of collaborative and collective learning in the four ETB schools involved in the study (Schools A, C, D and E). This was partly influenced by a culture of learning generated and driven by the ETB organisation.

In the remaining two voluntary schools (B and F), both Principals spoke of the professional learning opportunities created by the Joint Managerial Body (JMB), the management organisation for voluntary secondary schools. P2 mentioned that she had completed a leadership and management course through the JMB and found it helpful to her role. But she also referred to the challenge in availing of CPD for herself when *'there are days you just cannot get out the door'* (P2). In both schools, while a commitment to professional learning was evident, individualistic approaches were adopted and were never mandated by Principals. However, on occasion, opportunities to cascade this learning with colleagues were created.

Finally, in interviews with Principals, there was a sense that Principals 'buffered' staff from accelerated policy reform and interpreted and implemented change vis-à-vis its impact on the quality of teaching and learning. In Schools A and D, Principals spoke of the necessity to *'keep things as practical as possible'* when it came to interpreting new policy, and leading change initiatives in the school. For them, the focus of any change was centred around its impact on the quality of teaching and learning and maintained,

'When we look at an initiative being proposed, we always take out what is best practice for the learning environment for the child.'

(P4)

Furthermore, P4 insisted that change was positive and was happy for staff to be involved in pioneering new initiatives. He added,

'In all new initiatives there is research being conducted with very good aspects of new initiatives that should be embraced.'

(P4)

P3 was involved in an ETB *Leading Teaching and Learning Initiative* which focused on change management, and emphasised the role of distributed approaches to leadership in facilitating change. He insisted that,

'...if you can actually have a team on the ground who are trained in leading change and you work with that team, that team then spreads that information out.'

(P3)

He explained the importance of involving staff in the change process and said,

'...the "why" is critical. You need to know why you want to change or why you need to change....and giving people an involvement in the actual change itself so I'm not telling them this is how we have to change. I'm telling them that there is a reason why we are supposed to change or we should change. We get agreement....figure out how we're going to do it as a group, as a team.'

(P3)

Similarly, in School F, P6 spoke of the imperative for the Principal to *'lead by example'* (P6).

He spoke of the collaborative process he engages in with staff when planning for change and explained how he *'just opens it up and gives them the information'* (P6). Similar democratic approaches to change management were recounted by most Principals, with formal systems in place to work collaboratively and collectively to interpret and implement change. Most Principals also referred to the process of formal, mandatory *School Self-Evaluation* (DES, 2016) and how it facilitated internal collaborative, whole school reflection and evaluation of teaching and learning and leadership and management focused on school improvement. As an evidenced-based process, strongly underpinned by current discourse relating to the importance of transformational, distributed models of leadership, it was evident that Principals felt scaffolded and guided in their efforts to lead and manage change.

Such scaffolding is becoming increasingly important as a decade of unrelenting policy reform seems nowhere near abating. Participants were asked their views on the proposed new model of resource allocation which will be implemented from September 2017. Mixed views and levels of understanding were evident in data. Generally, SENCOs had a greater understanding of the detail about the new model and while acknowledging the need for change to the current

system, and in agreement with the philosophical grounding upon which the new model is founded, were quite sceptical about its implementation. SENCOs perceived that administrative workload would increase for them. The SENCO in School E conveyed her mixed feelings about it when she said,

'I feel it is well intentioned. It is excellent to build on the baseline data and setting of goals and the hardest part of assessing where you are on the goals. But there is the problem. How do you do this, who does it? Will it be just all paperwork and will we be doing no teaching? I could not possibly see us doing that here if we were teaching. So there is your expert team coming in with very little teaching.'

(S5)

Furthermore, SENCOs felt that any increase to their already overwhelming workload could result in a reduction in contact teaching time with students, and this was a particular concern for S2 and S5, who gained immense satisfaction from direct work with students. S2 asserted that she,

'...got into teaching because I love teaching, I enjoy admin. as well and being organised....the reason I went into teaching, helping kids, is that going to be taken from me? Are the kids going to suffer? Am I going to suffer?'

(S2)

Principals were equally sceptical about the model. In School F, P6 held negative views about the new model, while also acknowledging he knew very little about it, and spoke of a school which had been involved in the pilot.

In School D, despite acknowledging the positive impact the new model could have in terms of providing support to a greater number of students, P4 raised concerns about the level of SEN specific expertise required to enable schools to develop a school profile, and specifically spoke of the need for expertise in administering assessments and interpreting data,

'I think it will depend on how well developed the provisions for the school are and how well informed the SEN department and the school management are of the students in the school and their needs. And that all depends on assessment and information. If a school isn't up to date in terms of its SEN service, it's going to be very difficult in terms of benefiting the student.'

In summary, data relating to leadership in inclusive special education illustrated that:

- There were strong associations between SENCOs' expertise and leadership.
- Having a Post of Responsibility did not by itself promote SENCO leadership. Expert knowledge was the single most important variable attributed to SENCO status and capacity to lead. Furthermore, the POR created tensions within the SENCO role.
- The role of Principal leadership in supporting SENCO role enactment and a whole-school approach to inclusive special education was vital.
- Transformational, distributed and collaborative approaches to leading and managing change were evident in data. Such approaches fostered a culture of learning. Moreover, data evidenced schools' commitment to learning as illustrated by descriptions of school based learning initiatives and systems in place to facilitate professional learning.
- Participants displayed varying degrees of understanding or knowledge of the new model of resource allocation. While most participants were positive about it, they were sceptical about its implementation for a variety of reasons.

The next and final theme to emerge from data presents findings relating to Principals' and SENCOs views on perceived facilitators of SENCO role enactment.

4.4 Facilitators of SENCO Role Enactment

Participants' views on how the SENCO role could be developed and further supported were explicitly sought when asked '*If you could make recommendations to the Minister for Education about the SENCO role, what would you say?*' The following recommendations were universally offered:

- the SENCO role needs formal recognition;
- management status should automatically be assigned to the SENCO role in the form of a Post of Responsibility outside the schools' schedule of posts;
- provide greater access to external supports and resources at a system-wide level; and
- a team approach to SEN coordination should be encouraged with systems and resources in place to support collaboration.

4.4.1 Formal recognition of SENCO role

All participants spoke of the necessity for formal role recognition for SENCOs. Such recognition would stimulate the development of SENCO infrastructure which would facilitate role enactment. In the first instance, it would provide acknowledgement of the role (S1, S3, S5, P1, P2). Findings presented in Section 4.1 indicate the volume of work and level of complexity attributed to a role '*that does not exist*' (S1). According to S3, formalising the role would

'...acknowledge [that] someone deserves, when they're working all these hours, to actually label it and say "this is the position, this is the role you have", is really important.'

(S3)

She also felt that formal recognition would elevate the status attributed to SEN and insisted,

'If we believed in the importance of special ed., why in an education setting would you not have somebody to have responsibility for it? How can you say it's important if you don't?'

(S3)

The Principal in School C was of the same view and spoke of the '*critical importance*' (P3) of the role to the entire school community. Formal recognition of the role would also provide the much needed guidance sought by SENCOs and their Principals. The SENCO in School A spoke of '*working in a vacuum*', while S3 described the role as '*woolly and fluffy*' and all SENCOs

indicated that they had to a certain extent, made it up as they went along. In Schools A and B, SENCOs had developed their own job descriptions. P2 was wary about formalising the role as she believed it could restrict SENCOs' capacity for flexibility in role definition. She insisted that any formal restructuring of the role would need to allow for flexible interpretation in the various contexts. P6 believed that while *'procedures are clear for dealing with SEN students'*, they were not adequate. He believed the procedures such as applications for RACE, DARE, resource allocations etc. were clearly defined but felt the *'student is lost'* (P6) in the process.

4.4.2 Formal Management Status

Most participants indicated the importance of leadership to the SENCO role and called for the allocation of a POR, outside the schools' schedule of posts. Issues relating to the appointment to POR were discussed in Section 4.3 and S3, the only SENCO not represented within the management team in school, felt strongly that the role should automatically be assigned to management,

'You shouldn't have to fight for it. It's such a huge role and when the post comes up I'm going to be in competition with other people who do equally valuable jobs.'

(S3)

All except the Principal in School D believed that the SENCO should be appointed to Assistant Principal Post at the very least. All SENCOs agreed. All participants unanimously called for an allocation of time to allow the SENCO fulfil the role. While S4 had an Assistant Principal's Post, her Principal felt that time was what was needed to facilitate the role. For him, S4 was already recognised within the school and her post already prioritised so formal recognition at a policy level would do little to elevate the role beyond the status it had already acquired. He perceived that,

'...the SENCO role needs time. If you provide time, then a whole load of other things fall in to place, such as an expectation of a person in the role to do the work that they are allocated the time for. But if you don't give the time allocation to the person, it is hard to expect them to do a good job.'

(P4)

The SENCO, (S4) agreed that time was needed to support the role, but she also felt the POR was essential as it gave her a certain degree of influence and power. For the Principal in School E, the role was the equivalent to that of the Guidance Counsellor, and insisted that SENCOs needed,

'...supports and Acts, group meetings, the same way Guidance Counsellors get together and have that support network....It's isolating sometimes. In the school you're the expert. It's nice I think then to talk to others that are experts and also just say, "I don't know what I'm doing here" ...that safety would be nice.'

(P5)

She also felt, along with P3, that SENCOs should be financially rewarded for the work they do. While all participants believed that the SENCO should hold a postgraduate qualification in SEN, P6 stipulated that a SENCO should only be appointed to a POR if they hold a relevant qualification in SEN but insisted that he would continue to oversee coordination of SEN alongside the SENCO.

4.4.3 A Continuum of Support

Some SENCOs and Principals spoke of the lack of access to external agency support and the resultant impact on students with SEN. Furthermore, the impact was felt on school resources, namely on staff working within the SEN Team as presented in Section 4.1. In School A, the Principal believed that the external supports needed to facilitate and support inclusive education were insufficient to meet the needs, which placed pressure on SEN teams and school based resources.

Most SENCOs spoke of the need for curricular resources to support teaching and learning for students with SEN. They spoke of the time invested in producing individualised resources to support academic engagement for students with complex needs. S1 spoke of the hours SEN Teachers spent at home in the evenings developing individualised, differentiated resources for use in withdrawal settings or for use by mainstream subject teachers. For S2, a significant amount of time was spent at home in the evenings adapting and modifying curricular texts for students and some subject teachers. As S5 highlighted, there is no set curriculum in special education and therefore no ‘core text’ to work from. SENCOs recommended that centralised banks of resources be compiled for schools to support curricular access for students.

4.5 Conclusion

Data analysed from interviews with six Principals and their SENCOs/SEN Teacher illustrate the complex nature of the SENCO role and identify the interdependent and interconnected variables interacting to contribute to the evolution of the SENCO role in the various contexts. While commonalities existed in participant perceptions and practice across sites, and between Principals and SENCOs within sites, findings also present more nuanced variations in how the SENCO role was perceived and executed. Chapter Five will examine the extent to which the findings dovetail with the existing literature.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

5.0 Introduction

Experiences reported in this study confirm that SENCOs and their Principals are profoundly committed to and personally invested in supporting students with SEN in their schools. By addressing the need to delve deeply into the lives of real people working in complex and dynamic environments, the study aimed to share situated stories of SENCOs' and Principals' experiences in their efforts to lead inclusive special education. Chapter Four immersed the reader in real contexts of practice and offered insights into the dynamics conspiring to support or hinder SENCO role enactment both within and across sites.

This chapter considers the meanings behind these experiences while situating them within the wider arenas of existing research and demonstrates how they extend current knowledge. It is this chapter's purpose to interpret and discuss what has been revealed about inclusive leadership and the SENCO role from the perspectives of researcher, SENCO and Principal.

The chapter is organised around the key themes presented in Chapter Four which are:

- Complexities of inclusive special education
- Complexities of the SENCO role
- Leadership in inclusive special education
- Perceived facilitators of SENCO role enactment.

While this study set out to explore factors influencing the ways in which schools led and managed inclusive special education, what it found was that the inherent relational nature of the SENCO role both supported and challenged SENCOs in equal measure. Human interaction in all its messiness enveloped the SENCO role in layers of complexity, which, when peeled

back, identified at the core the inextricable link between SENCOs' unwavering duty of care to students and the burden such commitment places on the professional and personal lives of SENCOs.

The study found that school context is a fundamental influence on SENCOs' capacity to lead and manage inclusive special education. Central to cultivating a culture which is inclusive, reflective, collaborative, responsive and flexible is the school Principal. Contextual factors included: close alignment between SENCOs' and Principals' perspectives on inclusive education; shared vision and goals; distributed models of leadership; commitment to lifelong learning; investment in opportunities for professional learning and growth; valuing of individuals within the organisation and creation of systems both within the school and outside enabling collaborative practice.

Discussion of these findings, below, follows the thematic structure developed in the previous chapter and will exemplify how this study contributes to and extends current knowledge.

5.1 Complexities of Inclusive Special Education

School context, culture and ethos significantly influenced schools' interpretations of inclusive education in participating schools and school leadership was considered critical in promoting inclusive approaches to teaching and learning, and in elevating the status attributed to SEN, as corroborated by the literature (Fitzgerald, 2015; Fullan, 2005; Oldham and Radford, 2011). No universal definition of inclusive education exists (Armstrong et al, 2010; Norwich, 2012; Salend, 2011) and while all participants in this study conveyed passion and commitment towards inclusive education, the school context, ethos and culture in each site was unique and therefore interpretations of inclusive education were also unique or infused with a strong 'local flavour' (Dyson, 2009).

However, literature speaks of the tensions between policy and practice, where access to, participation in and benefit from learning (Government of Ireland 1998) may be compromised by the ‘realities of limited teacher skills, exclusionary pressures in schools, and...substantive differences between students’ (Dyson, 2001, p.27). Findings from this study were consistent with the literature in this regard. Many participants reported the challenges associated with inclusive education in their schools. Some Principals and SENCOs spoke of the need to challenge negative staff attitudes to SEN, especially in schools which were perceived as ‘academic’. Generating awareness and understanding of SEN and building school capacity through continuous commitment to professional learning were considered essential in supporting staff to teach in diverse classrooms and evidence of such was conveyed in this study.

Others spoke of the challenge in remaining inclusive if your student population only consisted of students with additional needs. Issues relating to disproportionality of SEN populations in schools emerged from findings and two divergent perspectives were presented. In School D, the Principal spoke of ‘*soft barriers*’ like entrance exams and student interviews being used to ‘*screen*’ potential students with SEN. The other perspective outlines disproportionality at the other extreme. If some schools are perhaps *selective* about who attends their schools, others are *selected* because of their inclusive ethos and school capacity to respond to the needs of diverse students. Two disadvantaged DEIS schools spoke of the ‘*double-edged sword*’ such success brings and one Principal (P5) questioned how a school could be truly inclusive if it was not populated with all kinds of students.

Much of the literature relating to inclusive and special education discussed in Chapter Two indicated the highly contentious and often conflicted discourse around it, which seems preoccupied with equating inclusive education to placement in mainstream settings (Rose et al, 2015). The debate has evolved in recent years, and while placement in mainstream is

considered desirable for most students with SEN, some commentators (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006; Hornby, 2015) acknowledge that this approach has failed some students with more complex needs, whom may require highly individualised evidenced-based intervention and support from skilled teachers. Ireland's engagement with inclusive education is relatively recent (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). Lack of awareness and understanding of SEN and limited capacity to respond to challenges presented by such diversity were mooted as barriers to inclusive education. Literature discussed in Chapter Two attests to the imperative for access to a continuum of provision with 'a spread of interconnected services and levels of services.....spreading pressures across the system' (Rix et. al 2013,p.26). The Principal in School A spoke of the tidal swell in numbers of students with SEN following legislative moves towards inclusive education (Government of Ireland, 2004). While conveying commitment to this process, she felt schools had been more or less left '*to get on with it*' (P1) without adequate access to much needed interconnected services and supports.

Inclusive education is not only about access to education, it is about meaningful engagement with emotional, social, academic and behavioural learning in the school, and is according to Warnock (2005) about where you feel you belong. Participants in this study spoke of the need for highly skilled SEN teachers to deliver individualised support to students with complex needs, and in schools where capacity was not developed, participants spoke of how some students' needs were not being met. Hornby's model of inclusive special education (2014), in my own view provides a pragmatic framework which would support schools to respond flexibly to the continuum of need along a continuum of provision. It supports a model of provision which favours placement for students in mainstream education but equally insists that education occurs along the continuum where students may be placed in a specialist setting. The development of partnerships between mainstream and special schools has also been recommended in the literature (Hornby, 2015; Rix et al, 2013). Rix et al (2013) called for co-

location of schools to facilitate a flexible response to placement along the continuum of provision and enable sharing of expertise, where the special schools may be used as a resource for mainstream schools. Currently, no such partnerships or formal arrangements to promote such relationships exist in Ireland. Furthermore, if special schools are to be used as a resource for mainstream schools, or seen as beacons of practice, providing evidenced-based intervention to students with complex needs, isn't this assuming that special schools are in fact beacons of effective practice? How can we be sure, when teachers working in special schools, not unlike their comrades in mainstream, are not required to undertake any postgraduate professional learning in special education?

There are limitations to the applicability of certain elements of Hornby's model (2014) to post-primary provision for students with SEN. Hornby advises part-time withdrawal from mainstream education for specialist intervention for some learners with more complex SEN. However in this study, while withdrawal from mainstream classes for SEN support was the predominant model in participating schools, it cannot be assumed that specialist intervention was provided for all learners. When I worked as a SEN Teacher a mainstream school in Ireland I worked alongside colleagues to deliver special education in withdrawal settings. Many colleagues had no previous background in SEN and were given a few sporadic resource hours as timetable fillers. Findings from the IFS and from this study highlight the ongoing practice whereby part-time teachers (of which there are many) are assigned casual resource teaching hours. Findings also indicate that withdrawal for SEN support was the predominant model. If students with SEN are being withdrawn from their mainstream class, what *specialist* interventions are they receiving if many are being taught by subject teachers with no SEN expertise? What *additional* and *different* teaching support is provided that couldn't be provided in the regular class?

However, some Principals in this study saw the value of involving many mainstream teachers in SEN teaching and believed it raised whole-school awareness of SEN and enabled teachers to take ownership of students with SEN in their mainstream classes. It also allowed students to avail of specific curricular support in subject areas, with subject specialists. However, while some Principals advocated this practice, no SENCOs did. SENCOs are often tasked with coordinating timetables and communicating with support staff to develop IEPs, timetables and provide professional support and guidance. Involving large numbers of teachers in SEN not only increased the administrative burden on participating SENCOs, it also, according to SENCOs, led to inconsistent levels of support which lacked cohesion at times. Findings suggest that core SEN teams in schools were important, but all acknowledged the necessary practice of involving other teachers, outside of the core team, to deliver more subject specific support. Furthermore, most SENCOs reported enjoyment of teaching in their subject areas like Art, History, or French and defended the importance of maintaining a balance between mainstream and special teaching.

Evidence from this study suggests that access to an interconnected continuum of provision is far from developed, and schools spoke of the lack of access to external professional support and its impact on school staff and students with SEN. How can schools develop capacity to respond to the complex learning needs of some students, when professional learning in SEN is neither mandated, nor freely accessible to SEN Teachers? Evidence from this study reassuringly attested to the importance placed on expertise in SEN, and all except two SENCOs held postgraduate level qualifications in SEN. The SEN Teacher in School F had applied for the DES *Combined Postgraduate Diploma in SEN*, but due to limited capacity, was unsuccessful in her application. Here was a school, committed to providing appropriate and meaningful learning opportunities for students with SEN, while also acknowledging the lack

of specialist knowledge available to meet the needs of students with more complex needs, and yet couldn't access the professional learning it needed.

Participants spoke of increasing diversity in their schools and the requirement for CPD for all teachers to enable an appropriate response. Some Principals and SENCOs in this study also spoke of sustainable models of CPD developed in their schools, which involved using school-based expertise to provide targeted and relevant CPD to all staff. The Principal in School E spoke of having a '*staff of experts*' and used this expertise, across various disciplines, to deliver CPD. In School's A and D, such an approach was also adopted. However, in School F, P6 spoke of the challenges in providing contextually relevant, focused CPD in SEN, which had to be provided by external support agencies like the PDST⁴ and the SESS because no such expertise resided within the school. While CPD provided by the SESS were commended and SENCOs particularly commented on the relevance of school-based SESS guidance and support, the sustainability and whole-school impact of CPD delivered offsite and attended by one member of staff was questioned. The findings relating to models of sustainable professional learning concur with literature and testify to the importance of school-based collective commitments to CPD (Fullan, 2011; Netolicky, 2016).

Issues relating to the current model of resource allocation were discussed by participants, which reinforce and further validate the DES and NCSE decision to move to a new model which promises a more equitable approach to provision for students with SEN. However, from my own perspective as a teacher educator, working closely with SENCOs, SEN Teachers and

⁴ Professional Development Service for Teachers: The PDST was established in September 2010 as a generic, integrated and cross-sectoral support service for schools. It is the country's largest single support service offering professional learning opportunities to teachers and school leaders in a range of pedagogical, curricular and educational areas.

schools, I have concerns about schools' capacity to engage with the new model of resource allocation in a way that ensures all students with SEN are identified and receive appropriate provision. The new model will require schools to generate educational profiles (to be welcomed if it reduces labelling and the need for privately paid for assessments) which provide evidence of need, partly arising from school-based identification of SEN. Doesn't this assume that schools will have expertise to do so? While plans for implementation of the new model in 2017 have been outlined by the NCSE and DES (DES, 2017; DES Circular 0014/2017) and acknowledge the need to provide schools with support to accurately identify student needs, because professional learning in SEN is not mandated, variations in expertise exists across schools.

In this study, school capacity to generate educational profiles was available in five of the six schools. In School F, there was no capacity to generate a profile that would enable the school to accurately identify all students' needs which require use of informal assessment (e.g. functional behavioural assessment, social skills, motivation, and mental health). While the National Educational Psychological Service (and hopefully the Health Service Executive) will continue to work with schools in terms of assessment for students with complex and significant needs, I am concerned that some students will not be identified, when expertise does not reside in schools.

Schools spoke of the increase in mental health issues amongst students, and the lack of specialist support available to students and schools in such situations. Government policy remains cognisant of the issue and aims to provide guidance to schools to deal with the rise in mental health issues. Furthermore, the current Minister for Education and Skills, in support of implementation of *A Programme for a Partnership Government* (Government of Ireland, 2016) has amended the Junior Cycle to include Wellbeing as a curricular subject. Fostering

collaborative partnerships between the DES and HSE, and building capacity to create multidisciplinary approaches to assessment, diagnosis and intervention are also spotlighted in the Programme. It remains to be seen how this gap in service will be plugged.

There will always be a need for specialist support, particularly when framed within Hornby's model of inclusive special education (2015) which recognises the necessity for evidenced-based specialist intervention for students with significant and complex needs. However, when identification and assessment of student need is predominantly derived from school-based screening and assessment, I fear some students will be missed.

One final point relates to the implementation of CPD to support schools in their efforts to implement the new model. Regional CPD information sessions are being coordinated by the DES (Spring 2017) and offered to representatives from schools. However, this CPD is not compulsory for schools. How can the DES ensure that schools will be prepared for this new model if CPD in support of it is not mandated?

The post-primary system itself presented challenges to inclusive special education. SENCOs in this study spoke of the challenges involved in disseminating information to subject teachers, and despite having systems in place to facilitate communication, not all teachers engaged. How can mainstream teachers plan for students with SEN if they are not aware of the learning needs of these students? SENCOs in this study developed various systems which aimed at informing and advising colleagues about students' needs. SENCOs reported success with some systems and frustration with lack of engagement with others. The literature explored in Chapter Two illustrated the importance of systems to communicate and collaborate with colleagues in a way that enabled these very teachers to lead learning for students with SEN in their classrooms (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Kugelmass, 2003; Norwich, 2010). If systems do not exist, or do exist but are not embedded in whole-school practice, SENCOs risk being seen as the *expert*

teachers of students with SEN and therefore may become singularly responsible for their learning (Layton, 2005). Repositioning SENCOs as Experts from isolated positions to SENCOs as Collaborators (Kearns, 2005), firmly positioned as figureheads providing leadership within the school, advising and coaching colleagues and advocating for students is necessary to universalise approaches to inclusive special education and promote inclusive pedagogy (Blandford and Gibson, 2000; Cole, 2005; Kugelmass, 2003; Norwich, 2010; Tissot, 2013).

While findings from this study aligned expert knowledge with leadership in SEN, this study also found that expertise was being used not only to teach, but also to advise, support and collaborate with mainstream colleagues. Most SENCOs in this study were seen as experts for the entire school community and acted in advisory roles to colleagues. The following section will discuss the impact of such a responsibility on SENCOs professional and personal lives.

5.2 Complexities of the SENCO Role

This study clearly demonstrated SENCOs' (and Principals') commitment to students with SEN. While SENCOs conveyed their sense of satisfaction when supporting and advocating for students, they also described '*how the doing of it was killing*' (S1) them.

All research literature concerning the SENCO role speaks of the enormous administrative workload and complexity associated with it (Cole, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2015; O'Gorman and Drudy, 2011; Oldham and Radford, 2011). The IFS stage of research detailed the specific nature of the work involved in the Irish context, as did this study to a lesser extent, and while similarities existed in relation to roles and responsibilities across schools, working conditions and status varied considerably. Time for duties varied amongst SENCOs as did POR status. Findings from the IFS revealed that many SENCOs were fulfilling what Cole (2005) calls

operational roles. They were *bogged down* with administrative duties which, to some extent prevented the more strategic development of SEN from a whole-school perspective. Furthermore, findings reveal the incremental increase in workload associated with the role. SENCOs were predominantly appointed as mainstream subject teachers and SEN Teachers and the coordination aspect just evolved over time, as illustrated by S5 when she declared herself to be '*an accident*' in the school. This finding concurs with research conducted by O'Gorman and Drudy (2011) and is indicative perhaps of the ad-hoc, informal development of the role in response to inclusive education and the associated administration involved in supporting students with SEN.

Perhaps it is also linked to increasing performativity agendas with demands for accountability and demonstrations of the *value added* dimensions of SEN teaching. When SENCOs spoke of '*the bit of paperwork building up and up*' (S5) they also spoke of their fear of spending more time on administration and less time teaching students once the new model of resource allocation is implemented. Similar fears have been realised in the UK, where the performativity agenda has resulted in 'more paperwork for less impact' (Pearson et al, 2015, p.55) and where SENCOs reported how the constant generation of student data diverted efforts away from direct teaching and were not perceived as effective use of time. However, a counterargument could also be made. In Ireland, research indicates that teachers and schools generally do not monitor and evaluate outcomes for students with SEN (Douglas et al, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2015; Rose et al, 2012; Rose et al, 2015). How can teachers plan for, monitor and evaluate progress for individual students when there is no documentation to inform approaches to provision? IEPs are not mandatory in Ireland (Rose, Shevlin et al, 2012) and while considered good practice in terms of planning, monitoring and evaluating interventions for students with complex and significant SEN, and in facilitating collaborative partnerships between all stakeholders, there has been no widespread adoption of IEPs (Rose, Shevlin et al, 2012; Rose et al, 2015). While

this study did not seek to evaluate documentation relevant to SEN, SENCOs did share some examples of anonymised IEPs, group education plans, student profiles, and information booklets for teachers etc. All participating schools, to varying degrees, had developed systems for identifying and assessing students and for generating and disseminating student profiles/group plans and IEPs to staff. This may be anomalous with the general post-primary sector. All SENCOs spoke of the need for assessment and individualised planning but most also reported issues when it came to finding time to evaluate targets and outcomes for students. It seems that a balance needs to be struck in terms of the amount of student data to be generated. But more importantly, any data collected needs to be used to inform planning for teaching and learning and not simply be seen as an exercise in evidencing *value added*.

While this more in-depth qualitative study found that SENCOs were engaged in the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy, it sought to understand *why* and *how* the role was so heavy and complex. Findings revealed a role that was inextricably linked to a powerful duty of care to students. The findings presented in Chapter Four testify to the complex relational nature of the role, and the sense of responsibility SENCOs felt towards some of the most vulnerable students in their schools. What magnified this burden of responsibility for SENCOs perhaps was their Principals' unwavering trust in their expertise and decision-making capabilities. Principals in many instances were directed by the expert knowledge of their SENCOs. While such trust and respect served to elevate SENCOs to positions of influence and leadership (Mackenzie, 2007), it also served to isolate them and increased the burden of responsibility when ultimately they were tasked with leading and guiding appropriate provision for students with SEN. All SENCOs spoke of the need for a team approach to the coordination of SEN, and all were insistent that responsibility for SEN should not reside within one individual (Oldham and Radford, 2011). As such, this study highlights the importance of developing schools as learning organisations (Senge, 1990), communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) or

adhocracies (Skrtic, 1991) where decision-making is a collective endeavour and teamwork, collaborative practice and flexibility are integral to schools' capacity to respond to diversity.

In many ways, SENCOs in this study did occupy a Third Space (Whitchurch, 2008). They comprised a hybrid group of teachers, with no real sense of identity as SENCOs and with no *standard plan* (Skrtic, 1991). While commonalities existed in relation to administrative duties executed by SENCOs, their roles evolved blindly in response to increasing diversity in their schools. The complexity of the role was perhaps compounded further by lack of formal role recognition. The role does not exist in policy and findings suggest that this added to SENCOs (and Principals) stress and anxiety. SENCOs reported, that despite the intensely relational nature of the role (i.e. being all things to all people), they felt very much alone in dealing with the overwhelming and difficult work they did. No set curriculum exists for the delivery of SEN teaching. It requires highly individualised, flexible and dynamic responses. Like adhocracies (Bennis and Slater, 1964; Skrtic, 1991), SENCOs operating within the Third Space,

‘invent new practices and procedures for doing work that is so ambiguous...no one can be sure exactly what needs to be done...knowledge develops as the work unfolds...success of the undertaking depends primarily on the ability of the [team] to adapt to each other along their uncharted route.’

(Skrtic et al, 1996, p.145)

This study found that a lack of formal role recognition also meant that systems and processes required to facilitate SENCOs in their role, like for example, professional networks, recognised status in their schools, formal role descriptions, opportunities for supported CPD, were underdeveloped or did not exist. Some Principals in this study equated the SENCO role to that of the Guidance Counsellor, yet because Guidance Counselling is a recognised *profession* the necessary systems and structures to enable them to fulfil their roles are in place. There is recognition at policy level of the complex and important work undertaken by Guidance Counsellors in Ireland. No such recognition is afforded to SENCOs, despite school level

insistence on the centrality of the role to support inclusion of students with SEN. This needs to change. In line with much of the national and international research literature (Cole, 2005; Cowne, 2005; Hallett and Hallett, 2010; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011) I have argued, from the beginning, the necessity for formalisation of the SENCO role at policy level. At the very least it would provide recognition of the (often invisible and misunderstood) work involved when SENCOs try to navigate their *uncharted route* (Skrtic, 1991). However, while all participants in this study believed the role should be formalised, they also cautioned against formalising it to an extent which resulted in ‘*the poor person [being] hemmed in by more rules and paperwork*’ (P2). It seems flexibility in role interpretation would be important to any formalisation of the role, which was also recommended by O’Gorman and Drudy (2011).

Despite commentary in support of developing the SENCO role, not all literature concurs. A tension exists within the role and in the literature. Some literature speaks of the need for a SENCO with expertise; who is visionary and can lead the SEN agenda; who can become a change agent and collaborate with colleagues (Arnaiz and Castejon, 2001; Cole, 2005; Cowne, 2005; Layton, 2007; Lewis and Crisp, 2007). Moreover, distinctions between *special* and *inclusive* education have been made which insist on the importance of specialist expertise required to meet the more complex needs of some students along a continuum of need (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006; Hornby, 2015; Kaufman and Badar, 2014). Yet others argue the need for a universal approach to special education (DES, 2007; Mackenzie, 2007; Norwich, 2010; Oldham and Radford, 2011; Wedell, 2004) with a move away from the expert model (Ekins, 2013; Florian and Linklater, 2009). Why do schools need SEN experts when all teachers should be able to teach all students if the principles of UDL and differentiation are applied? Does the existence of the *expert* perpetuate a dual system of *special* and *mainstream* education and result

in ‘divergent forces...operating on the relevance of leadership to the SENCO role and placing it in tension’ (Oldham and Radford, 2011, p.127)?

Findings reveal that expertise was valued above all else when it came to leading and coordinating inclusive special education from a whole-school perspective. According to participants, how could SENCOs advise, mentor, and consult with colleagues in relation to SEN (which formed a significant part of their role), if they did not have expert knowledge and understanding themselves? Rather than preserve a dual system, SENCOs in this study *conquered the divide* and brought their expertise to the site of learning. While some SENCOs conveyed their confidence in leading whole-staff CPD initiatives in SEN, others spoke of quietly supporting colleagues who sought them out. Either way, SENCOs described a role involving a significant amount of consultation with staff. Therefore, it follows that any formalisation of the SENCO role would require a certain level of expertise.

While proponents of universal approaches to SEN argue that such an approach would diminish the need for SEN advocates (Arnaiz and Castejon, 2001; Hausstätter and Takala, 2008; Oldham and Radford, 2011), in that responsibility for students with SEN is collectively shared, this study also found that advocacy continues to feature strongly in the role. SENCOs as *caring warriors* (Cole, 2005) were very much evident in data. Certain attributes were shared by all SENCOs in this study which may suggest that a certain *type* of person is suited to the role. Attributes such as: kindness, patience, tolerance, honesty, courage, open-mindedness, empathy and approachability were evident amongst all SENCOs. Findings reveal that Principals and SENCOs believe that not all teachers are suited to SEN teaching which reinforces the notion that certain key attributes or traits are perhaps required to fulfil the role. Furthermore, advocacy

also acted as a key motivator for undertaking the role, which concurs with a study undertaken by Tissot (2013).

5.3 Leadership in Inclusive Special Education

This study found that school leadership was critical to promoting inclusive approaches to teaching and learning in schools, and in elevating the status attributed to SEN, as corroborated by the literature (Cowne, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2015; Fullan, 2005; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011; Tissot, 2013). Four key factors in this study contributed to SENCOs capacity to lead SEN and influence colleagues:

1. expert knowledge;
2. distributed approaches to leadership;
3. Principal leadership; and
4. collaborative approaches-developing schools as learning organisations.

Expert Knowledge

In terms of SENCO leadership, findings reveal that expertise was synonymous with capacity to lead, and is consistent with some research literature (Pearson, 2010; Rosen-Webb, 2011). A substantial *reservoir of power* (Rosen-Webb, 2011) was associated with SENCOs who held postgraduate qualifications in SEN and had considerable experience in the field. This afforded them a certain *authority of expertise* (Bush, 2008). SENCOs were considered the ‘go to’ (S3) person in the school for all SEN related issues. However, while most SENCOs in this study held postgraduate qualifications in SEN, and all Principals spoke of the necessity for such qualifications, this is not mandated and the level of qualification evident across SENCOs in this study may not be representative across the post-primary sector. In fact, my experience as

a teacher educator and provider of CPD to schools in my current job, and in a previous role with the Special Education Support Service, indicates that significant variation exists across the sector.

Findings indicate that schools' ability to develop universal approaches to inclusive special education is not only reliant on SEN expertise but is determined by SENCOs ability to develop *change competence* in order to be agentive (Tangen, 2005). This study found that SENCOs were agentive in their schools. A multiplicity of variables influenced their capacity to effect change, with expert knowledge being the most important. However, while some SENCOs in this study resisted any associations with leadership, they were in fact influential and had developed *change competence* to lead changes to inclusive special education in their schools. They became Effective Learning Coordinators (Dyson, 1993) and were instrumental in advising, coaching, and supporting colleagues in their efforts to provide meaningful learning opportunities for students with SEN and develop relevant pedagogical skills (Kugelmass, 2003). However, when the concept of change competence is deconstructed, findings in this study reveal the significance of relationships, underpinned by strong interpersonal skills, were necessary to influence colleagues. Nonetheless, while expert knowledge and development of change competence are critical to developing SENCOs as strategic leaders, they are not enough. Principal leadership and development of schools as collaborative learning organisations are also essential ingredients in fostering whole-school approaches to inclusive special education. While this study also found that positional leadership roles (i.e. POR) increased SENCOs' capacity to lead the SEN agenda, considered in isolation it does not presume leadership, and conversely, lack of positional leadership does not exclude SENCOs from leading.

Distributed Approaches to Leadership

Distributed approaches to leadership were evident across schools, which is unsurprising considering policy and legislative moves towards formalised distributed leadership vis-à-vis the Post of Responsibility structures in schools (DES Circular Letter 0025/2016). Chapter One indicated that distributed leadership in this thesis would be considered in the broader sense of the meaning (Duignan, 2007; Spillane, 2006) and would look for evidence of SENCO leadership irrespective of any positional leadership role. Appointment to the school leadership team in itself is not evidence of leadership, and isn't a *panacea* to facilitate SENCO leadership (Hallett and Hallett, 2010). Five of the six SENCOs participating in this study held management positions in their schools. The remaining SENCO (S3) held no POR and had no time for coordination duties.

The literature systematically argues that if SENCOs are to influence whole-school policy and practice in SEN they need to be strategically placed within the school leadership team (Cole, 2005; Layton, 2005; O'Gorman and Drudy, 2011; Tissot, 2013). Interestingly, while findings reveal that SENCOs felt a POR supported them in their role, this study also revealed, contrary to existing literature, that the POR created a barrier to developing team approaches to SEN. Two out of six SENCOs (S2 and S4) reported this unanticipated perspective, and therefore it warrants discussion. Both felt that because they were being paid for the POR and were given time for duties, they could not delegate tasks or expect others to '*take work home*' (S2). Might this relate to how little is understood of the SENCO role, and fueled by a lack of formal role recognition, is there perhaps an assumption that the role can easily be contained within a POR? Findings reveal the complexity of the role aggravated by its *diffused* nature (Busher and Harris, 2000), which sees SENCOs being *all things to all people*. Is a lack of formal role recognition

suggestive of the lowly status attributed to the role (at policy level) and therefore devaluing SENCOs own perceptions of the work they undertake?

Concepts of *power* and *influence* were briefly discussed in Chapter Four. S5, who did have a POR, did not consider herself a leader as she felt perhaps that she had no power. However, on closer inspection, findings reveal that she had significant influence in the school. She had what could be considered *professional capital* (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Netolicky, 2016) which increased her capacity to lead the SEN agenda in her school. She was respected in her role, her expertise was called upon frequently by colleagues, and there was an understanding that her role required significant,

‘technical knowledge, high levels of education, strong practice within schools, and continuous improvement over time that is undertaken collaboratively, and that calls for the development of wise judgement’.

(Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012, p.37)

Similarly, while S3 held no positional leadership role, she was undoubtedly considered the leader of SEN in her school perhaps because of the professional capital she held (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). Moreover, professional capital matured in schools invested in collaborative and collective approaches to learning and growing as a community. In keeping with the spirit of distributed approaches to leadership as defined by Spillane (2008) and Duignan (2007), SENCOs in this study demonstrated leadership in their interactions with colleagues, students and parents. They used their expertise, experience and highly developed social and interpersonal skills or *social capital* (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012) to influence others.

Furthermore, findings in this study concur with research conducted by Humphries (2010) who found that both formal and informal middle-management positions could be effective in bringing about change if collaborative cultures permeated schools and if learning was nurtured

for all members of the school community. Furthermore, while this study argues for the formalisation of the SENCO role and elevation to the school leadership team, findings reveal that there is capacity for SENCOs operating informally within the school to lead change when collaborative learning approaches to leadership are fostered and embedded in school culture and practice. The critical role of the Principal in nurturing collaborative cultures has been acknowledged in the literature (Cowne, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2015; Oldham and Radford, 2011) and the following section elaborates further.

Principal Leadership

The importance attributed to Principals in promoting inclusive special education and the SENCO role was recognised and acknowledged in the embryonic stages of this study. Support from the Principal is imperative to the effective coordination of special education provision (Cowne, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2015). This study explored *how* Principals supported their SENCOs and nurtured environments which promoted inclusive practice and found that Principals' personal and professional commitment to inclusive special education, and the translation of this commitment into practice, was significant in cultivating a school culture which was positively disposed to inclusive special education.

In this study, Principals spoke of the importance of being able to *walk the talk*. P5 insisted that '*if the Principal isn't on board and doesn't believe in it, well that filters down all the way*'. SENCOs also spoke of the importance of Principals putting their weight behind the inclusive agenda and described how Principals: professionalised their role; openly demonstrated trust and confidence in their expertise; elevated their status as experts; created systems and opportunities for SENCOs to lead SEN; prioritised SEN; and where possible, redirected resources and support to facilitate the development of inclusive special education.

The literature identified three broad tasks Principals need to attend to in their efforts to develop learning-rich (Barth, 2001) inclusive schools. They need to:

1. promote new meanings about difference and diversity embedded in social models;
2. facilitate and encourage inclusive practice; and
3. develop communities of practice within the school and with the wider community

(Riehl, 2000)

Evidence from this study suggests that Principals not only promoted positive meanings about difference and diversity, they challenged existing negative staff attitudes. In addition, they facilitated inclusive practice and committed time and resourcing to develop inclusive special education provision in their schools. For example, time was allocated to devise IEPs, develop strategic departmental plans, meet with parents, and facilitate CPD opportunities. Evidence of collaboration was found in this study. Decision-making was predominantly collective and collaborative. The process of School Self-Evaluation (DES, 2016) perhaps encouraged such an approach where collegiality and sharing of expertise were explicitly encouraged in some schools.

In an era of unrelenting policy reform, any organisation's readiness to embrace change is reliant on the nature and quality of leadership (NCCA, 2010). Transformational approaches to leadership foster teacher engagement and commitment to change processes and are more likely to reduce teacher's pain and anxiety (Hargreaves, 2004) and result in deep change (Fullan, 1993). Principals are strategically placed to influence the development of a collaborative learning organisation (Senge, 1998). In this study, Principals were explicitly asked how they led and managed change. The necessity to engage staff in the decision-making process and engender ownership emerged which is consistent with the literature exploring the dynamics of

change leadership (Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves, 2004; Netolicky, 2016). P3 spoke of his involvement in an initiative developed by the Education and Training Board entitled *Leading Teaching and Learning*, which emphasised the importance of distributed leadership and collective and collaborative approaches to decision-making. Findings reveal evidence of the practical translation of such an approach.

Furthermore, not only were collaborative approaches evident and favoured over top-down approaches in most schools in this study, some Principals indicated their '*practical*' (P4) approach to policy implementation. A guiding standard for Principals and schools in their interpretation of policy related to '*the best practice for the learning environment for the child*' (P4) and some Principals engaged in the street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980) associated with policy reform, and were selective in what they chose to take from policy. While collaborative approaches were adopted in many schools, Principals also demonstrated key leadership in identifying what was important to bring to staff and what was important to perhaps *buffer* staff from. While this study focused on the SENCO role, it also highlighted the responsibility levelled on Principals, and the complexity of their role in an educational landscape that has shifted dramatically, and where Principal leadership has been *given away*. Principals are expected to foster distributed approaches to leadership and move away from autocratic, individualistic approaches (Pascal, 2009). The literature discussed in Chapter Two spotlights the tension attributed to Principal leadership which fosters *flattened* approaches (Forde et al, 2015). Such *giving away* of power can prove challenging for Principals, especially within increasing performativity-driven agendas (Barnett, 2008; Sachs, 2001) and requires Principals to trust in the skills, knowledge, values and beliefs of their teachers (Bottery, 2006). However, while all Principals in this study conveyed implicit trust in their SENCOs' capabilities, and findings indicate that values, attitudes and vision of SENCOs and their

Principals were closely aligned, a couple of tensions emerged in relation to delegation (or lack thereof) of certain tasks.

In School E, S5 spoke of her desire to have greater input into timetabling for SEN provision. Findings suggest she felt a level of disempowerment. In School F P6 was the SENCO. His commitment and dedication, while nurturing an open and inclusive whole-school approach, perhaps limited SEN Teachers' opportunities to share in the leadership of SEN. Nevertheless, when Principals are considered the gatekeepers of accountability, relinquishing power can be a challenge, and could compromise the relationship between Principals and SENCOs (King, 2012). This study indicated that relationships between Principals and SENCOs were wholly positive. This is not necessarily representative of the wider post-primary landscape, where such tensions could easily emerge if mistrust exists and shared vision does not exist.

The following section discusses the extent to which collaborative approaches were fostered in participating schools with reference to the existing literature.

Collaborative Approaches-Developing Schools as Learning Organisations

Mentioned earlier, developing SENCOs' capacity to lead SEN and effect change to whole-school approaches is dependent on an interconnected and interdependent number of variables: namely, SENCO expertise, distributed approaches to leadership, supportive Principal leadership and collaborative approaches to responding to SEN and growing capacity at school level. School improvement is linked to a school's collective capacity to respond to change (Senge, 1990) and therefore a reconfiguration of school organisations as *adhocracies* (Bennis and Slater, 1964; Skrtic, 1991), *communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) or *learning organisations* (Senge, 1990) is required. Transformational leadership facilitates the creation of

school systems which promote collaboration and develop schools as learning organisations. Principals and SENCOs in this study demonstrated capacity to transform their schools, especially in light of ongoing and impending policy reform by:

- *motivating staff* to invest time and effort to engage with inclusive pedagogies, develop relationships and commit to collective goals which maintain high expectations for all members of the learning organisation (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Bottery, 2006; Kugelmass, 2003; Netolicky, 2016);
- *building capacity* along a continuum of provision. SENCOs advised, mentored and supported Subject Teachers and SEN Teachers in efforts to develop universal responses to common needs and individual responses to unique and complex needs. Principals directed resources and priorities to facilitate professional learning for all staff (Arnaiz and Castejon, 2005; Norwich, 2012; Oldham and Radford, 2011);
- *designing collaborative systems* which facilitated collaborative practice, shared and situated learning, collective problem-solving and problem-posing (Ainscow and Sandill, 2011; Arnaiz and Castejon, 2001; Brodin and Lindstrand, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2015; Norwich, 2010; Oldham and Radford, 2011; Wenger, 1998); and
- *improving the teaching and learning environment* for all students, but particularly those with SEN, by fostering *learning-rich* cultures (Barth, 2001) and committing to ongoing professional learning and directing resources to facilitate this, insisting on developing SEN capacity within a core SEN team by appointing qualified SEN Teachers (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Cordingley, 2014).

Finally, Norwich (2010) speaks of special education as a *bolted on* curriculum, an afterthought perhaps to core school planning. As a teacher educator, provider of school CPD and researcher I have been fortunate to work with many schools over the years and have, on occasion, encountered these *bolted on* approaches to special education. However, in this study evidence

of SEN embedded in whole-school planning was provided in most schools participating. Provision for students with SEN was both discreet and permeated. Inclusive special education as a conceptual model (Hornby, 2015) could be applied to provision in participating schools as they catered for student need along a continuum of school-based provision ranging from individualised support in withdrawal settings to universal support by way of co-teaching arrangements and school-led commitment to CPD in inclusive pedagogies.

5.4 Perceived Facilitators of SENCO Role Enactment

Literature discussed in Chapter Two identifies potential and perceived facilitators to SENCO role enactment which support the strategic development of the role. Findings from this study correspond with the literature, but also identify additional factors which could promote the role in the Irish context as illustrated in Table 5.1. Any attempt to identify potential facilitators required an exploration of what it is SENCOs actually do. This study and the preliminary phase undertaken in the IFS indicate that the predominant responsibilities of SENCOs in Irish post-primary schools include:

- *teaching*-mainstream subject teaching and support teaching;
- *administration*-IEPs, timetables, assessment, systems development to disseminate information, RACE applications, transition planning;
- *advocacy*-awareness raising at whole-school level, challenging staff attitudes, representing students with SEN;
- *collaboration*-with colleagues, parents, Principals, external agencies;
- *management*-of SNAs, SEN Teachers;
- *leadership*-using expert knowledge to inform school policy and drive school practice in inclusive special education; and

- *advising, coaching, mentoring*-using expert knowledge and interpersonal skills to influence colleagues' attitudes and practice, building colleagues' repertoires of pedagogical skills to develop capacity to respond to diversity at classroom level.

Table 5.1: *Facilitators of SENCO Role Enactment*

Facilitator	Literature	Perspectives from current study
Formalisation of the role at policy level but tensions exist-discreet specialist role versus general coordination role.	Cole, 2005; Ekins, 2013; Fitzgerald, 2015; Florian and Linklater, 2009; Norwich, 2010; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011.	Formalisation of the role at policy level, but flexibly interpreted at local level.
Universal approaches to SEN coordination, led by Principal	DES, 2007; Oldham and Radford, 2011.	Recognition of joint leadership of SEN by Principal <u>and</u> SENCO. Importance of discreet role for SENCO conveyed.
Mandatory membership of school leadership team to elevate status of SEN.	Cole, 2005; Cowne, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2015; Layton, 2007; Oldham and Radford, 2011; Szwed, 2007; Tissot, 2013.	Mandatory POR which sits outside current schedule of Posts, develop status equivalent to Guidance Counsellor.
Mandatory membership of school leadership team to develop whole-school approach to inclusive special education.	Fitzgerald, 2015; Hallett and Hallett, 2010; Rosen-Webb, 2011; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011.	Mandatory POR.
Specialist knowledge, understanding and skills-postgraduate level qualifications in SEN with focus on SEN, developing strategic leadership and collaborative competencies and managerial/administrative skills	Arnaiz and Castejon, 2001; Cole, 2005; Pearson, 2010; Pearson et al, 2015; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Tangen, 2005.	Specialist knowledge, mandated professional qualification in SEN (little reference to developing leadership skills).
Time for duties	Cowne, 2005; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Pearson et al; 2015; Tissot, 2013.	Time for duties determined by quantum of resource hours allocation and flexibly deployed.

Team approach to coordination of SEN	Cowne, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2015; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011.	Team approach to coordination of SEN.
Developing schools as learning organisations, fostering collaborative and collective approaches to inclusive special education	Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Fong Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Fullan, 1993; Hargreaves et al., 2007; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Senge, 1998; Skrtic, 1991.	Develop opportunities for capacity building at school level-sharing of expertise, structured.
Collaborative approaches to professional learning-communities of practice, professional learning networks	Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2015; Netolicky, 2016.	Develop learning professional networks for SENCOs across schools.
Developing systems to promote universal responses and ownership of SEN	Fitzgerald, 2015; Oldham and Radford, 2011.	Developing systems to promote universal responses and ownership of SEN
Access to a continuum of support for schools	Rix et al., 2013, Rose et al., 2015.	Access to a continuum of support for: 1. Students-develop capacity amongst professional services to meet needs. 2. SENCOs and Support Teachers-curricular resources, professional and collegial supports.

Participants in this study spoke of the need for formal recognition of the SENCO role at policy level to enable SENCOs to fulfil key responsibilities outlined above. While arguments for and against formalisation of the SENCO role are discussed in Chapter Two, consensus is only reached when acknowledging the tensions that exist when advocating for the creation of a discreet SENCO role to act as a figurehead, visionary, advocate and advisor. Is there a need for specialist coordination of SEN when labels such as ‘special educational needs’ are perhaps incompatible with the philosophy of inclusion (Norwich, 2010; Thomas and Loxley, 2007) and when policy advocates a universal approach (DES, 2007; 2016)? I would argue, as I have argued throughout this thesis, that in a system of education that acknowledges a need for both *inclusive* and *special* education (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006; Hornby, 2005; Kaufman and Badar, 2014), the necessity for a specialist to lead the inclusive special education (Hornby, 2015) agenda in schools is imperative. Furthermore, Norwich (2010) seeks clarity about the need for a specialist and argues that,

‘a specialist function can be justified if there is something distinctive and useful about the knowledge and skills the others cannot easily acquire....But, it is not just a matter of capability, but also whether others have an interest and willingness to acquire the knowledge/skills and use it.’

(Norwich, 2010, p.42)

Daly (2016) insists on the development of special education as a *profession* and justifies her position by asserting that; special education is a discipline which uses theory to inform practice; is underpinned by a significant body of research; and requires *distinctive* and *useful* SEN and pedagogical related knowledge. Findings from this study forcefully demonstrate the supremacy of expert knowledge to the SENCO role, where such knowledge is synonymous with leadership and capacity to influence.

Findings in this study also reveal that a lack of formal SENCO role recognition impacted upon the personal and professional lives of participating SENCOs. In some ways, findings linked to formal recognition contribute to existing knowledge as the role is officially recognised in many jurisdictions (Arnaiz and Castejon, 2005; Fong Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Hausstätter and Takala, 2008; Hornby, 2012; Kearns, 2005; Lindqvist and Nilholm, 2011), unlike in Ireland. A lack of formal role recognition created ambiguity about the role (Cole, 2005; Rosen-Webb, 2011) but also perhaps caused SENCOs to internalise much of the anxiety attributed to the role as *their* inability to 'keep on top of things' (S2). Lack of formal role recognition has created a role that is misunderstood, or not understood, and often invisible which has led to isolation for SENCOs. This sense of isolation is exacerbated further by the non-existence of professional support structures, like professional networks, representative bodies and affiliations to provide collegial support and solidify SENCOs' identities as *professionals*.

Finally, this study found that leadership is perhaps the single most critical factor in determining schools' responses to inclusive special education. An organisation's readiness to embrace change is influenced by the nature and quality of leadership (NCCA, 2010). Leadership from Principals was important in two ways:

1. Principals displayed commitment to the process of inclusive special education in tangible ways. Such displays served to prioritise SEN in schools and elevate the status attributed to it. By default, it elevated the status attributed to SENCOs.
2. Principals were instrumental in developing school cultures which were inclusive, collaborative, founded on mutual trust and respect, and fostered collective decision-making and commitment to learning. Furthermore, distributed approaches to leadership, evidenced in this study, encouraged both collective and individual ownership of SEN. This study found evidence of schools as *learning organisations*

(Senge, 1998), cultivated by Principals. In concurrence with the literature, findings reveal that when collaborative relationships are nurtured in schools, and when staff are not only involved, but *invested* in decision-making, it supports the individual and the collective in managing change.

5.5 Conclusion

As discussed in this chapter, this study intended to contribute contextual and perspectival layers to what is understood in the literature about leadership and management in inclusive special education, and specifically explored the SENCO role in six mainstream post-primary schools. In so doing, it combined fields in the literature not always considered concurrently, namely: approaches to leadership in inclusive special education, professional identities of SENCOs, and school change and explored the complexities attributed to the interdependent and interactive dynamics between them. Chapter Six will synthesise this study by revisiting the research questions, will draw conclusions and derive implications for policy, practice and further research. A reflexive orientation was adopted in this study, and as the research process is nearing completion, limitations will be outlined. Finally, this study was undertaken as a practice led professional doctorate. Dissemination plans and personal (professional) outcomes are presented which delineate how this study's impact may be maximised.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

6.0 Introduction

This study used interpretivism and a qualitative approach to understand the complexity of human interaction. It focused on contextually-embedded approaches to inclusive leadership and change management, professional learning and professional identities in six post-primary schools. Unlike other studies which examine the SENCO role (Cole, 2005; Cowne, 2005; Kearns, 2005; Pearson, 2010; Tissot, 2013), this study adds to existing literature in that it sought to understand the SENCO role not only from the perspective of SENCOs, but from their Principals also. While many findings concur with existing knowledge, the contribution of this study lies in its approach in bringing together perspectives of both Principals and SENCOs in the Irish context, about which little is known, and has implications for Principals, SENCOs, policy makers, and providers of CPD in the field of inclusive special education and school leadership.

Justified in Chapter One, this study is both timely and necessary. Chapter Two explored existing perspectives on inclusive and special education, the SENCO role, leadership of SEN and change, and professional learning, which led to the formulation of the study's research questions. Chapter Three defended the paradigmatic and methodological approach adopted in the study and methods employed to answer the research questions. Chapter Four presented this study's stories from the field (Stake, 1995). Chapter Five interlaced these stories together, situating the research within current literature and discussed how findings contribute to or extend existing knowledge.

It is the role of this chapter, Chapter Six, to synthesise what has been learned from this undertaking and draw conclusions. It presents a conceptual model which embodies the SENCO role in all its complexity and may offer some direction for future policy formulation. This chapter also examines implications of this research for theorising the phenomenon under scrutiny; for my own professional practice, educational policy and practice and further research. Limitations will be outlined and a dissemination plan drawn up to enhance the study's impact.

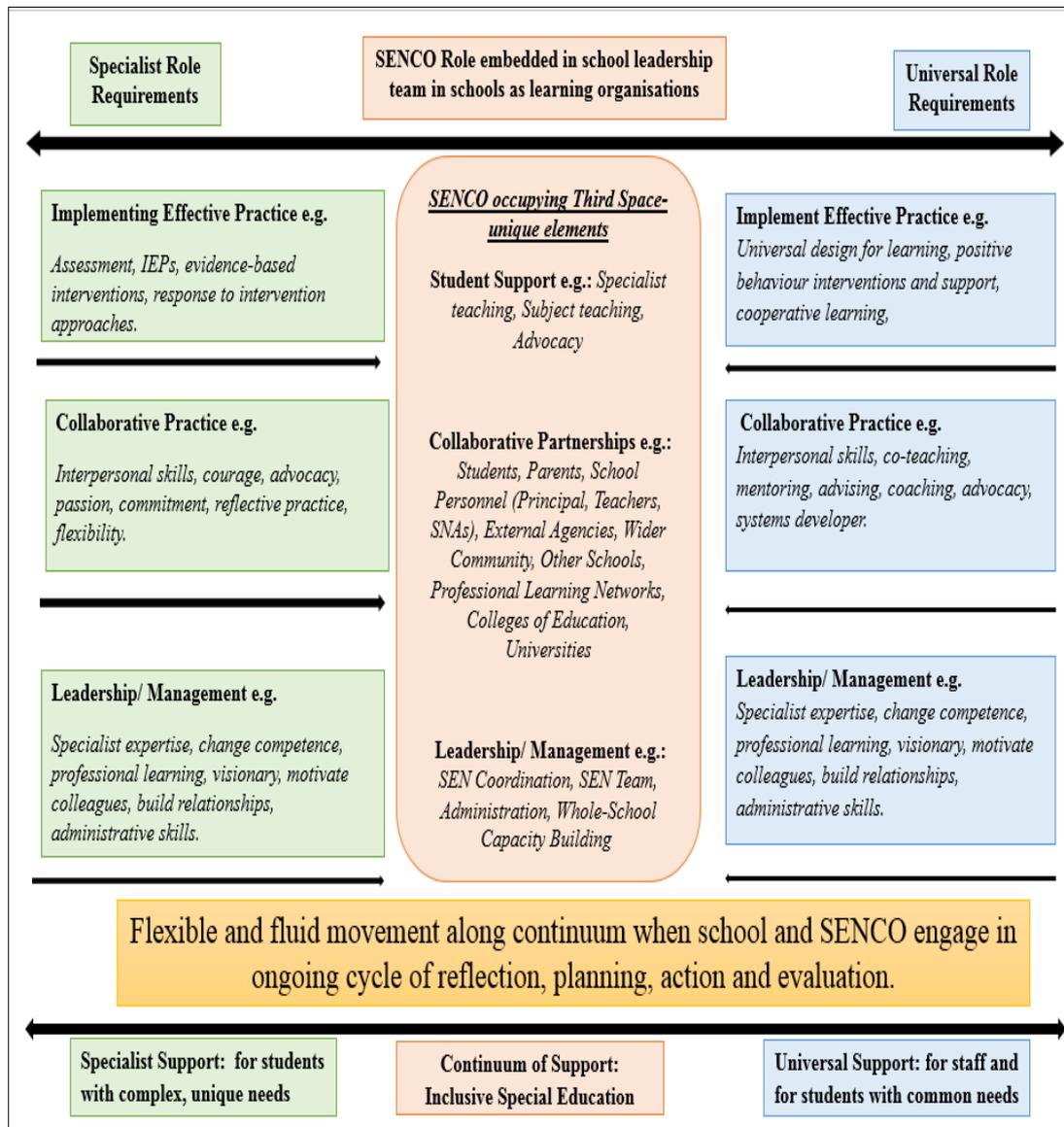
6.1. Conceptual Model of the SENCO Role

An attempt at developing a conceptual model for the SENCO role in Ireland is illustrated in Figure 6.1 which is primarily inspired by findings from this study but is underpinned by key theoretical concepts developed in Chapter Two.

The model embodies fundamental elements of the SENCO role as represented by the literature and key findings from this study. It illustrates the unique position the SENCO maintains within the *Third Space* (Whitchurch, 2008) and demonstrates how the SENCO role requires specific skills to support both specialist and universal approaches to *inclusive special education* (Hornby, 2015). Specifically, SENCOs require knowledge, skills and understanding about inclusive special education along a continuum. In essence, SENCOs must *straddle* the divide between specialist and universal approaches to provision in their efforts to build seamless and flexible provision for learners along the continuum. The model recognises the necessity for SENCO skills promoting whole-school implementation of effective practice, collaborative practice and leadership and management of inclusive special education. It also accurately reflects findings from this study and others which testify to the complexity of a role which

requires SENCOs to be *all things to all people*, and underlines the significance of relationships with students, parents, colleagues and external agencies.

Figure 6.1: *Conceptual Model of the SENCO role in the Irish Context*



The importance of a *continuum of skills* for SENCOs to lead and coordinate a whole-school *continuum of provision* is reflected in the model. SENCOs require specialist pedagogical knowledge to meet the needs of students presenting with a continuum of need ranging from individualised evidenced-based support for students with significant and complex needs to universal support for students with common needs. Perhaps more importantly, SENCOs

require skills to advise, mentor, coach and support colleagues to develop inclusive pedagogical skills which enable learning at classroom level.

The centrality leadership to the SENCO role is also acknowledged in the model and reflects the importance of positional leadership in developing SENCO agency and capacity to lead the SEN agenda in schools. However, while positional leadership has been identified as a facilitator of SENCO role enactment, the model recognises the importance of school context and culture. When schools develop collaborative spaces for colleagues to work together towards a shared vision, SENCO agency may be allowed to flourish. When schools develop systems which facilitate collective and individual reflection, planning, action and evaluation in relation to teaching and learning for students with SEN it may support schools to identify the need for change. In learning organisations (Senge, 1991) where such cultures (and practices) exist, it may engender reflective and adaptable responses to meeting diverse needs along an uncharted route where no standard programme exists (Skrtic, 1991).

The conceptual model offers a unique perspective on the SENCO role in the Irish context and ultimately supports a theory driven response to the research questions which are now revisited.

6.2 Revisiting the Research Questions

This section returns to the research questions (Table 6.1) in an effort to synthesise findings and examines the extent to which this study addresses the questions, with careful consideration to the extant literature.

Table 6.1: *Study Research Questions*

Research Questions

1. In the context of mainstream post-primary schools, how do SENCOs and their Principals conceptualise the SENCO role?
2. What barriers and facilitators influence SENCOs and Principals in leading and managing provision for learners with SEN?
3. How do SENCOs and their Principals implement change and support colleagues to develop inclusive practice?

1. In the context of mainstream post-primary schools, how do SENCOs and their Principals conceptualise the SENCO role?

Much of the literature discussed in this study testifies to the ambiguity surrounding SENCO role enactment (for example Arnaiz and Castejon, 2001; Cole, 2005; Cowne, 2005; Oldham and Radford, 2011; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Tangen, 2005). Research indicates that much of this ambiguity relates to how the role is formalised and defined. Is it or should it be a strategic leadership role? Or should SENCOs concern themselves with the day-to-day operation of the school SEN policy? In this study, similar ambiguity was evident, perhaps to a greater extent, considering the lack of formal role recognition. While SENCOs exist in practice, they operate in a policy vacuum.

However, while findings in this study attest to the need for further policy guidance about the SENCO role, both SENCOs and Principals were consistent in their conceptualisations of the role. The SENCO role was synonymous with expert knowledge. The notion of SENCO as Expert (Kearns, 2005) was revealed in this study but there are distinctions to be made between Kearns' typology and what emerged from this study. When considered against a continuum of provision, which supports students with unique and complex needs through individualised

intervention in withdrawal settings, to supporting students with common needs through classroom provision, SENCOs used their expertise to support learning right across the continuum. While Kearns (2005) describes the Expert as somebody working, predominantly in isolation, with small groups of students with unique and complex needs, this study extends the notion of SENCO as Expert, to include use of this expertise to support colleagues to enable engagement for students with common needs through inclusive pedagogical and curricular support. In essence the Expert and Collaborator roles (Kearns, 2005) are combined to facilitate SENCOs in specialist teaching and advisory roles. Specialist knowledge and expertise underpin SENCOs' capacity to perform the role in this way, as was unanimously reported by all participants in this study.

Furthermore, such levels of expertise enabled SENCOs' ability to influence colleagues' attitudes and approaches to inclusive special education. By default, while some SENCOs in this study resisted associations with leadership in their roles, they all led, or shared in leading, the SEN agenda in schools and were instrumental in bringing about change in practice.

Tensions in conceptualisations of the role emerged both in the literature and in this study. The IFS (Fitzgerald, 2015) suggested that SENCOs occupy a Third Space (Whitchurch, 2008). Having completed this study, findings reveal that they do indeed occupy this space. The role is unique, complex, difficult and fundamentally relational in nature. The diffused nature of the role (Busher and Harris, 2000), where SENCOs are required to be '*all things to all people*' (S1), and where highly individualised responses to need are essential, fuelled ambiguity about the role. With no standard programme (Skrtic, 1991) to guide SENCOs in their work, in addition to a lack of formal role recognition, much of the work of SENCOs is misunderstood, or not understood and is invisible. While Principals in this study did recognise and acknowledge the magnitude of the role, this cannot be generalised to the wider post-primary

population. Principals in this study demonstrated a clear commitment to inclusive education, prioritised it in their schools, and ultimately elevated the status attributed to SEN and by default the SENCO. In concurrence with existing literature, when Principals assigned importance to inclusive special education, it supported a universal response (Fong Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Hallett and Hallett, 2010; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011; Oldham and Radford, 2011). While conceptualisations of the SENCO role remain ambiguous, when Principals explicitly promoted inclusive education in their schools, and challenged negative staff attitudes, it fostered more positive conceptualisations of inclusive special education in general, and cultivated cultures, and communities of practice, which were adaptable, flexible, and open to inclusive education (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Norwich, 2012).

2. What barriers and facilitators influence SENCOs and Principals in leading and managing provision for students with SEN?

Facilitators

Findings from this study highlighted the importance of school culture and context as key determinants of schools’ abilities to flexibly respond to the challenges encountered when including students with diverse and complex learning needs. Key to cultivating a culture which facilitates flexibility is the Principal (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Cowne, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2015; NCCA, 2010; Swaffield and Macbeath, 2009). In this study, Principals were heavily committed to progressing inclusive special education in their schools. In the IFS stage of the research process, the metaphor of Principals as horticulturalists was used. Findings from this phase of research reinforce this view insofar as evidence was collected which demonstrated how they nurtured growth and development of all staff by engendering an openness to new learning and enquiry (fostered development of schools as learning organisations (Senge, 1998). These horticulturalists planted seeds which grew inclusive curricular programmes and

challenged long held belief systems. They watered those seeds empowering staff to take greater action (nurturing trust, shared vision, mutual respect (Bottery, 2006), and nourished roots extending into the wider community by welcoming parental involvement. In a time of austerity, they altered the flow of resources to better encourage growth. Perhaps identified as the key facilitator of inclusive practice in this study, Principals' commitment to and support for inclusive special education allowed other facilitators to flourish.

SENCOs *human capital* (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012) was significant in this study. Their personal attributes (courage, honesty, passion, commitment, sense of ethical responsibility, empathy, compassion, kindness) combined with their professional competency (knowledge, expertise, experience, communication, teaching, leadership) grew unique roles in their schools. Many Principals spoke of the inimitable contributions of their SENCOs arising from a combination of personal and professional attributes. Professional identity and learning are inextricably linked to personal and life experiences and moreover, professional learning shapes identity (Netolicky, 2016). Four factors were significant in elevating the status of SENCOs and their capacity to influence colleagues and lead inclusive special education in their schools: Principals, expert knowledge, collaborative practice and positional leadership.

Barriers

Literature points to tensions in the SENCO role which, on the one hand insists on a universal approach to inclusive special education (DES, 2007; Florian and Linklater, 2009; Norwich, 2012; Oldham and Radford, 2011; Wedell, 2004), questioning the need for SENCOs, and on the other hand provides evidence of the continued need for specialists, in advisory and advocacy roles, championing and leading the SEN agenda in schools (Cole, 2005; Cowne, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2015; O'Gorman and Drudy, 2011; Oldham and Radford, 2011; Rosen-Webb, 2011). Such tensions hinder the development of a clear SENCO identity and lead to

multifarious interpretations of the role in practice (Mackenzie, 2007; Wedell 2006). In this study, participants spoke of the need to formalise the SENCO role and spoke of the barriers generated by the current lack of formal role recognition in Ireland. Lack of recognition (or understanding) of the complex nature of the role has isolated SENCOs. The intense relational and individualised nature of the role when working with students with highly complex needs created an enormous burden of responsibility for SENCOs in this study. They spoke of the impact such a burden had on their professional and personal lives. Lack of understanding about the complexity of the role created a barrier which denied SENCOs access to the supports they needed to fulfil the role.

The complexity of the work involved in the role is well documented in this study and others (Cole, 2005; Norwich, 2012; Pearson et al, 2015; Rosen-Webb, 2011), as is the uniqueness of the role (Cole, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2015). While evidence of collaborative practice and team approaches were found in this study, professional support, collegiality and guidance *for* SENCOs *from* SENCOs is lacking. The benefit of professional learning communities is expounded in literature relating to professional learning and growth (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Hargreaves et al, 2007; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Netolicky, 2016; Senge, 1998). Lack of access to professional support and guidance could lead to SENCO burnout, and draws attention to the sustainability of the role for any one individual over a prolonged period.

Identified as a facilitator, developing SENCO expertise in special education is imperative to empowering SENCOs develop leadership capacity. However in Chapter Five, reference to the SENCO role as a *poison chalice* was made. In many ways, while authority of expertise (Bush, 2008) was considered important in developing leadership status, it also served to increase

SENCOs' burden of responsibility and sense of isolation in relation to informed decision-making, despite reporting on the support received from their Principals.

Membership of the school leadership team facilitates the SENCO role (Cowne, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2015; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Tissot, 2013). Conversely, this study found that while the POR in itself was not sufficient to elevate the status of SEN (and the SENCO) in the school, or influence whole-school change, not having a POR meant that SEN perspectives were omitted from decision-making at management level.

Time for duties (that old chestnut!) unsurprisingly featured in all the literature relating to the SENCO role (Cowne, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2015; O'Gorman and Drudy, 2011; Pearson et al, 2015), as it did in this study. All participants in this study spoke of the relentless pace of the SENCO role, and the enormous time required to fulfil the role. Principals and SENCOs reported that the administrative burden attributed to the role is unequalled to any other school role, particularly in larger schools. Furthermore, this study revealed that SENCOs spent considerable time meeting with parents, students, external agencies and colleagues, and the boundaries of the role were limitless. Lack of time and more importantly perhaps, lack of recognition of the time needed to undertake the role created enormous stress for SENCOs.

3. How do SENCOs and their Principals implement change and support colleagues to develop inclusive practice?

Adjusting to change requires new learning and can be a deeply unsettling and painful process (Hargreaves, 2004; Netolicky, 2016). The significance of relationships in learning indicates that professional learning is a situated individual and collective process as well as being an engaged social practice deeply influenced by the environment or context (Forde et al, 2015;

Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Netolicky, 2016). Developing schools as learning organisations (Senge, 1998), communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) or adhocracies (Skrtic, 1991), invested in fostering collaborative and collective decision-making, problem-solving, problem-posing, flexible and reflective responses to change encourages open-mindedness and engagement with the change process (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Riehl, 2000; Senge, 1998). In this study, transformational leadership approaches were evident. Principals and SENCOs engaged in collaborative decision-making in their efforts to foster engagement with change initiatives. Furthermore, schools developed systems which facilitated collaborative practice, and Principals in particular were instrumental in repositioning their SENCOs from potentially marginalised, isolated and *bolted on* (Norwich, 2010) roles, to ones which were firmly embedded in whole-school planning for inclusive special education.

6.3 Conclusions

A return to the research questions offered a synthesis of the findings. Conclusions derived from the findings are now presented.

1. The SENCO role is heavy and complex and requires support at practice and policy level.
2. In school contexts where collaborative and collective approaches to teaching and learning were evident, SENCOs were more agentic. Developing collaborative practice within and between schools will facilitate the role.
3. Inclusive special education provision was jointly led by participating Principals and SENCOs. When Principals prioritised SEN, it supported SENCOs in their role. Raising awareness amongst Principals is therefore important.

4. SENCOs felt isolated in their roles, which partly arose from the uniqueness of the role, but moreover, related to the burden of responsibility felt when perceived as the experts in the school. Team approaches to leadership and coordination of SEN are important to reduce the sense of isolation and disperse decision-making responsibility with the specialist team.
5. Leadership in this study was closely aligned to specialist expertise. Building specialist capacity in schools is important to facilitate development of the SENCO as knowledgeable guide/advisor/mentor and coach.
6. While tensions in the literature debate the need for a discreet SENCO role in a system of education espousing a universal approach, this study found that creation of discreet SENCO roles elevated the status of SEN and in turn, promoted a whole-school response spearheaded by expert SENCOs.
7. A POR elevated the status attached to SEN and the SENCO, and facilitated SENCO voice and opportunities to develop systems to promote whole-school SEN approaches.

6.4 Implications for Professional Practice

Implications for Colleges of Education and Third Level Institutions

As a teacher educator in a College of Education providing pre-service and in-service teacher professional learning and development in the area of inclusive special education, this study has delivered significant learning to me. While some SENCOs in this study spoke of the benefits of the Postgraduate Diploma in SEN in facilitating their role, teachers receive limited input in relation to the strategic development of whole-school approaches to SEN. Professional learning in the area of leadership in inclusive special education is necessary to promote competencies in SENCOs as strategic leaders.

In September 2017, the system of allocating resources to students with SEN will move from a deficit/category based model to a school-led, needs based approach. This will have implications for course design in the colleges of education. While strengths and needs based approaches to identification, assessment and provision for students with SEN occurs, ‘disability of the week’ approaches are still prevalent (in my own institution). A greater orientation towards needs based profiling, which moves away from categorisation and labelling of disability are warranted.

This research process has facilitated the development of strong collaborative relationships with schools. Not only have relationships with participating schools been maintained, dissemination of this research thus far has brought me to other schools. Furthermore, the Limerick SENCO Forum, while providing professional and collegial support for SENCOs and Principals in the Limerick area, has also forged strong collaborative partnerships between my institution and schools. There is capacity to further develop partnerships between Colleges of Education and schools. In so doing, a merging of research and practice will foster research-informed, situated and contextually relevant professional learning.

Implications for SENCOs

This study indicated the importance of developing professional learning networks for SENCOs. The importance of networking beyond the school community to engage in the sustained advancement of new thinking and the development of new relationships at a systems level was highlighted. Put simply, ‘efforts to foster inclusive school development are more likely to be effective when they are part of a wider strategy’, (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010, p.409). Professional networking with other schools in an attempt to develop ‘lateral capacity building towards sustainable development’, (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010, p.410) would not only foster

professional growth, it would also provide the much needed collegiality so desired by SENCOs participating in this study. Not only can these professional learning networks strengthen individual schools' capability to respond to learner diversity (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010), they can create a Third Space for SENCOs, where individualism is abandoned in favour of innovative dynamism generated through collaboration in this domain (Whitchurch, 2008).

SENCOs in this study demonstrated a commitment to their roles which was admirable, but worrying. While all reported enormous job satisfaction, burnout in their role as SENCO is likely. While formalisation of the role and an increase in supports to assist SENCOs in fulfilling the role are advocated, a team approach to the coordination of SEN provision is imperative, where duties and responsibilities are delegated and spread across the team. SENCOs need to develop leadership and management skills which will assist them in leading SEN teams.

School Principals

The pivotal role of the Principal in advancing inclusive special education has been well documented throughout this study. Professional learning for Principals related to inclusive leadership is essential. Inclusive leadership in this study equated to Principals' capacity to transform practice and is concerned with 'relationality to other people.....an understanding of the context, tasks, goals and decision-making processes', (Carroll et al, 2008, p. 346).

6.5 Implications for Policy

New Model of Resource Allocation

A new model of resource allocation will be implemented in September 2017. This model will increase schools' responsibilities for identification and assessment of special educational need. Any move towards a school led, needs based approach to identification, assessment, provision and evaluation of SEN will have CPD implications for school personnel. For policy-makers

this move perhaps makes the assumption that capacity exists in the system to support the model. This may not necessarily be the case, as highlighted by participants in this study. When no specialist qualification in SEN is required to work in this field then school level capacity to respond to inclusive special education is reliant on individual teachers' and Principals' recognition of the importance of specialist expertise and investment in mandated and self-selected professional learning. Policy-makers need to recognise the unique contributions and specialist expertise required of those working in special education and develop special education as a *profession*.

Underpinned by an understanding of the SENCO as both specialist and universal advisor (Figure 6.1) attention must also be given to developing collaborative, relational skills of SENCOs in order to move away from expert models of SEN, which, when taken in isolation, serve to perpetuate a categorical, deficit view (Norwich, 2010) and legitimises segregated provision for all students with SEN. Steps to develop the SENCO role as specialist teacher, collaborator and leader will require, in the case of Ireland, formal conceptualisation and recognition of the role. In other countries like Spain (Arnaiz and Castejon, 2001), Finland (Takala et al, 2009), New Zealand (Hornby, 2014) and the UK (Oldham and Radford, 2011) the role is formally recognised. However, except for the UK, where policy initiatives are in place to promote a more strategic, collaborative function to the role (Rosen-Webb, 2011; Tissot, 2013), elsewhere, policy reflects a categorical, specialised role, requiring SENCOs to provide additional and different specialist intervention to students *with* difficulties, to the neglect of an advisory, collaborative role which builds capacity at school level amongst colleagues to support students *in* difficulty. Any formal conceptualisation of the SENCO role in Ireland must be founded on promoting a universal response to common needs and specialist response to unique and complex needs.

Development of the SENCO as strategic leader, represented on the school leadership team is necessary if SENCOs are to facilitate and lead a universal response to inclusive special education (Arnaiz and Castejon, 2001; Cole, 2005; Hallett and Hallett, 2010; Oldham and Radford, 2011; Takala et al, 2009). In the UK, policy recommends that SENCOs be represented on the senior leadership team, but to date practice varies (Tissot, 2013). Where SENCOs were represented on the school leadership team, research indicates that strategic development of SEN is more likely as it serves to elevate the status attributed to SEN and the SENCO (Cole, 2005; Cowne, 2005; Oldham and Radford, 2011; Pearson et al, 2015). However, membership to the school leadership team in itself, does not assume strategic leadership of SEN (Hallett and Hallett, 2010). In Hong Kong for example, where policy insists that SENCOs maintain a deputy principal level role, due to the autocratic and hierarchical nature of leadership within the education system, SENCOs in senior leadership roles had little impact according to Fong Poon-McBrayer (2012). Furthermore, SENCOs themselves need professional learning opportunities to build leadership and collaborative skills to develop competencies which promote a collective, whole-school response (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Kugelmass, 2003).

Building System-Wide Capacity

In a system of education which formally recognises the importance of a *continuum of support* to meet a *continuum of need*, full and immediate reinstatement of the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) is required. The most recent communication from the DES about implementation of the new model of resource allocation to schools (DES Circular 0014/2017) indicates that schools will need to develop individual education plans ‘as an essential element of a whole-school approach to meeting students’ needs’ (DES Circular, 0014/2017, p.22).

However, the Circular indicates that schools will do this by way of the ‘Student Support File’. Are we to assume that these Student Support Files will replace IEPs? Will they become enshrined in law? While IEPs are not currently statutory, and therefore widespread implementation is inconsistent (Rose et al, 2012), schools will need to engage with Student Support Files in order to develop future school profiles and ultimately secure additional resourcing. This move has served to further muddy the waters in relation to individualised and/or group planning. Will all students identified (rather than diagnosed) with SEN require Student Support Files? The DES, together with the NCSE, need to provide greater clarity relating to statutory obligations involved in individualised planning.

Individual education planning for students with significant and complex needs recognises the importance of collaborative partnership between parents, students, schools and external agencies to facilitate learning for students (DES Circular 0014/2017). Partnerships can only be facilitated when partners exist. This study highlighted a system-wide capacity issue amongst external agencies. Services such as speech and language therapy, NEPs, occupational therapy, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are grossly under-resourced and wholly insufficient to meet school-level demand. In May 2016, the newly formed Partnership Government published its five year *Programme for a Partnership Government* (Government of Ireland, 2016) and encouragingly has recognised the need to develop system-wide and school-level capacity to respond to SEN. Furthermore, it has acknowledged the necessity for developing alternative service-delivery models and, for example, in response to research-based evidence championing the benefits of school-based speech and language therapy, will establish a new model of in-school therapy. Pressure needs to continue to be applied to ensure the Government follows through on its plans.

6.6 Limitations

Designing and conducting the *perfect* study in education is impossible insists Mertens (2010). While I endeavoured to conduct a well-designed study, it must be acknowledged that a number of limitations apply. These limitations require consideration when interpreting findings derived from this research.

Generalisation and External Validity

The most significant limitation of this research was its scale. A small, highly purposive sample participated and therefore is not representative of all post-primary SENCOs in Ireland. Nevertheless, the sample attempted to represent the broad range of schools and SENCOs and therefore findings are useful and are worthy of consideration when exploring the experiences and perceptions of SENCOs in Irish post-primary schools.

The sample may not be representative for reasons related to Principals' and SENCOs' commitment to inclusive special education. Data may reflect *selection bias* (Robson, 2011) as participants committed to special education or who may have been known to me through professional engagement in CPD may have felt motivated to contribute to the research. Moreover, when I initially set about recruiting participants for this study, I made initial contact with SENCOs to ascertain their interest and asked permission to contact their Principals. One SENCO declined the invitation to participate because her views were incongruous with those of her Principal and she did not want any potential conflict exposed. One could assume that relationships between participating SENCOs and their Principals were positive, and their views were closely aligned. Therefore, findings revealed and conclusions drawn in this study are predicated on positive professional relationships between SENCOs and their Principals who share in their passion, drive and determination to provide high quality teaching and learning

opportunities for students with SEN and who value diversity in their schools. This is not necessarily reflective of the wider post-primary landscape.

A limitation of qualitative research relates to its capacity for external validity (Mertens, 2010). It is true that certain findings in this study are characteristically local, particularly when interpretations of inclusive education are infused with a strong *local flavour* (Dyson, 2009). Specifically, procedures for teacher recruitment and appointment to management positions (POR) in Irish schools are unique to the Irish system and have significant implications (challenges) for leadership in SEN and the SENCO role. However, this research, while small-scale, studied the phenomenon from multiple perspectives and findings very much align with theoretical constructs developed in the literature review thus facilitating theoretical replication (Yin, 2009). The conceptual model of the SENCO role (Figure 6.1) arising from this research has, I would argue, generalisability to a wider population. Key literature critiqued in Chapter Two provided the theoretical lens through which data were interpreted to arrive at this construct of the SENCO role. Key elements of this construct include:

- Recognition of the need for a *continuum of provision* to support and flexibly respond to a *continuum of need* (Carroll, 2011; Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994; Hornby, 2015; Rix et al, 2013; Warnock, 2005);
- Recognition of the *continuum of skill and competency* needed for SENCOs to respond to a continuum of need, ranging from specialist to universal role requirements (Cole, 2005; Hallett and Hallett, 2010; Hornby, 2013; Norwich, 2010; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011);
- Acknowledgement that specialist knowledge and understanding of SEN and specialist pedagogy is necessary to provide evidenced-based intervention to students with unique

and complex needs (Carroll, 2011; Griffin and Shevlin, 2011; Hornby, 2015; Takala et al, 2009; Tangen, 2005);

- Understanding that specialist knowledge and expertise is not enough to lead whole-school change initiatives. For SENCOs to lead SEN in schools and develop agency, they need to be embedded in school leadership teams and develop collaborative skills and *change competence* (Tangen, 2005); and
- Recognition of the importance of developing schools as learning organisations (Senge, 1998), communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) or adhocracies (Skrtic, 1991) in order to facilitate flexible and fluid whole-school responses to inclusive special education (Hornby, 2015) and an acknowledgement that the Principal is central to this process.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research, like all research approaches has its strengths and limitations. While this study attempted to present participant views in ways that were truthful and reflective of those views (Bryman, 2008), qualitative analysis very much depends on the words and perceptions of people in all their complexity and experience, and therefore may not be factually or logically reliable (Gronn, 2009). Collected responses represent a snapshot in time in the lives of participating SENCOs and Principals. As an interpretivist I acknowledge that truth is subjective and is under constant construction. Therefore, views expressed by me, the researcher and participants in this research may change over time.

Personal Perspective and Potential Bias

This study generated more data than is represented in this thesis. As an interpretivist, presentation and analysis of data were framed by my own interpretation of what was considered

relevant and important. My positionality in this study was stated at the outset. My values, beliefs and experiences have shaped my approach to the research, and have influenced my interpretations of data. My meaning-making of participants' meaning-making was unlikely to derive highly replicable findings and therefore the quality of the study depends very much on the integrity of the research process. While transparency in how data were analysed was provided, interpretation of data was informed by my professional experiences and knowledge of the literature. Theoretical constructs related to inclusive special education and influences shaping SENCO role enactment are explicitly outlined in Chapter Two, which provided a conceptual lens through which data were analysed and interpreted.

While transparency is provided in how the research was conducted and I endeavoured to comply with all ethical considerations, I acknowledge that at times I (unintentionally) imposed my value judgements on participants and led them towards conclusions I wanted, for example,

Researcher: *'What I'm hearing from you in terms of your role is that, it's all about the relationships that you have?'* and

Researcher: *'That's the problem. It's [SENCO role] not formalised or recognised as a role. In terms of the challenges relating to the coordination of special education, do you encounter challenges?'*

Furthermore, a reflexive orientation was adopted in this study. While this study argues for the formalisation of the SENCO role at policy level, one might also argue against any such formal recognition of a specialist role. Much of the literature (while predominantly supportive of the need to formalise the role) addresses the tensions that arise by debating justification for the very existence of the term special educational need in a system espousing universal approaches to inclusive education. Does creation of a specialist role encourage the development of a dual

system? This study acknowledges the need for specialist support for a minority of learners with complex needs and espouses the importance of a dual system to a certain extent. However, by ascribing to this philosophy it justifies the very existence of my own professional role. As a *special education* teacher educator, am I not to gain professionally from any recommendation to professionalise special education, to formalise the SENCO role and mandate professional learning? Won't any such recommendation sustain me in my profession? However, throughout the research process I have examined my positionality for personal bias and included data which disconfirmed my own personal theories. In so doing, it allowed the voices of participants to clearly emerge.

The importance of maintaining rigour in qualitative research was discussed extensively in Chapter Three. While my actions as a researcher during this process were guided by ethical procedures outlined in Chapter Three, I have been aware of my own emotional response at various stages and can identify specific feelings:

- empathy- and sympathy at times for the situation SENCOs find themselves in;
- gratitude-for participants' generosity , not only in giving me some of their precious time, but also for a level of honesty and intimacy I did not expect;
- upset-at SENCOs' raw emotion when describing the impact the role had on their professional and personal lives;
- anxiety-that I would interpret participants stories honestly, accurately and in a manner that left the relationships between SENCOs and their Principals intact;
- respect-(without being patronising) for the commitment demonstrated by SENCOs and Principals to their students; and
- hope- that in some small way this research will make a useful contribution.

Limited triangulation

Much of the literature relating to inclusive special education acknowledges the absence of student and parental voice in the decision-making processes relating to students with SEN. Participants in this study spoke of the importance of parents and students as collaborative partners in planning provision for students. A significant perspective relating to leadership in inclusive special education is absent from this research. Parents and students themselves have key leadership roles to play in schools and while data were triangulated by using multiple sites and multiple perspectives, the absence of student and parental voice is a limitation of the study. Effectiveness of inclusive special education is measured by its impact upon student learning in its entirety-academic, emotional, behavioural and social. Who better than students themselves to judge whether or not they feel a sense of belonging, or engage with meaningful learning at a level that provides opportunities to make progress and experience success with levels commensurate with their own abilities.

6.7 Further Research

This research has not only answered some questions relating to leadership in inclusive special education, it has also raised many more. Exploring the SENCO role and conceptualisations SENCOs and Principals had about the role represents but a single aspect of the complexities associated with leadership in inclusive special education. This study highlighted the dogged sense of commitment SENCOs felt towards students in their care. I was drawn to their personal stories and think the research could be enriched by deeper explorations of SENCOs' life histories in attempts to understand their underlying motivation to continue working in roles that have, despite their immense job satisfaction, impacted negatively on their professional and personal lives.

Key themes in the literature linked to change leadership spoke of the necessity for ongoing commitment to professional growth and learning. While this study explored some of the literature related to models of professional learning and collected some data about approaches to CPD, my work with the Limerick SENCO Forum has spotlighted the importance of professional learning networks to support SENCOs' learning. Findings in this study also revealed an absence of formal structures and systems to support SENCOs in their role. I may undertake post-doctoral research with the SENCO Forum to explore the extent to which it has supported SENCOs in the role. Alternatively, a SENCO is considering conducting Master's level research on the SENCO Forum as a sustainable model of professional learning.

While O'Gorman and Drudy (2011) undertook an extensive study of CPD requirements of SEN Teachers working in mainstream schools, the educational landscape has changed even since then. Furthermore, an exploration of the professional learning needs of SENCOs as *strategic leaders* has not been undertaken in the Irish context, which seems particularly relevant as we move to a school-led needs based model of resource allocation. This new model will have significant implications for the leadership and coordination of SEN in schools. Further research which explores the impact of the new model of the SENCO role, and implications for professional learning would be a worthwhile endeavour once the new model is embedded in schools.

Parental and student voice is absent from this study. Mentioned above as a limitation, a case study methodology exploring one school's approach to inclusive special education from the perspective of parents, students with SEN, students without SEN, subject teachers, SNA's SEN Teams and the school leadership team would provide a portal into the dynamics, challenges and successes of inclusive special education from multiple perspectives, particularly as we move to a new model.

6.8 Dissemination and Personal Outcomes

In Chapter One I described how the Minister for Education and Skills in 2013 issued a call for research informing policy-makers about what was happening in real contexts of practice. In 2015 I completed the initial phase of this research (IFS). Shortly after submission I attended a meeting with the JMB SEN Advisory Group and contributed my research to a discussion about the necessity for formalisation of the SENCO role with key policy-makers in the DES, NCSE, NEPS and the Inspectorate. Leaving the meeting, I felt an urgency to condense my 20,000 word research report into an accessible format that *might* increase the likelihood that these key policy-makers would actually read it. As an outcome, I recently published, together with my supervisor, a peer-reviewed article⁵. The educational landscape, while in a constant state of flux, is undergoing significant transformation. Leadership in schools, particularly at post-primary level and special education feature significantly in current policy change and substantial investment has been earmarked for these two areas (DES, 2017). Dissemination of research which may inform policy implementation relating to these two areas is not only timely, it is necessary. This study, while small-scale, has some important implications for policy and practice. It spotlights the plight of SENCOs working in a policy vacuum in Irish post-primary schools and will I hope, contribute in some small way to the ongoing debate relating to leadership and management of inclusive special education in Ireland and support further development and recognition of the role.

⁵ Fitzgerald, J. and Radford, J. (February 2017 online version). ‘The SENCO role in post-primary schools in Ireland: victims or agents of change?’. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*.

This study is a culmination of almost five years' work and as such dissemination plans began when I embarked upon it. Future dissemination plans are outlined in Table 6.2 but a full dissemination plan detailing dissemination of doctoral research since its inception is provided in Appendix J.

While formal plans to disseminate this research are outlined, one of the aims of this study was to support schools and SENCOs in their work. Therefore, the importance of disseminating this research to schools is important. In my current professional role, I have been sharing my research with teachers undertaking the PGDSEN. Furthermore, I have been using this research to inform course content relating to SEN coordination in post-primary schools. My role also takes me into the community and I regularly provide CPD to either whole-staff or SEN Teams in post-primary schools.

Table 6.2: *Disseminating the research*

Dissemination Platform	Contribution
Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Annual Meeting, Boston, USA.	Fitzgerald, J. (April 2017). <i>Leadership in Inclusive Special Education: A Qualitative Exploration of the SENCO Role in Post-Primary Schools in Ireland</i> (poster presentation).
Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA) Annual Conference, Dublin 2017.	September 2017: Intended submission to orally present findings from doctoral research.
European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) 2018.	August 2018: Intended submission to orally present findings from doctoral research.
Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) Annual Conference 2018.	April 2018: Intended submission to orally present findings from doctoral research.

REACH: Journal of the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE).	Before April 2018: Intended article submission relating to doctoral research but with a focus on professional learning and the potential for developing professional learning communities for SENCOs.
An international journal relating to educational leadership.	Before June 2019: Intended article submission relating to doctoral research but with a focus on approaches to leadership in inclusive education.

Additionally, the Limerick SENCO Forum has grown considerably since its inception in April 2015. As a professional learning network, it has facilitated CPD for SENCOs, their Principals and other school personnel and has created a shared space offering support and collegiality. Furthermore, it has bridged the gap between research and practice, and the Forum has been used, and will continue to be used to share research-based practice relating to the SENCO role and inclusive special education generally.

Finally, this research has served as a conduit to further collaborative research (if funding is secured). Together with a colleague in Mary Immaculate College, we have been invited to join a Pan-EU *Erasmus* + funding bid to design, implement and evaluate SENCO CPD specific to developing their role as strategic leaders in inclusive education. If successful, the project will involve working with partner universities in the UK, Italy, Romania and France.

6.9 Concluding Comments

This study explored leadership in inclusive special education and the nature of the SENCO role in post-primary schools in the mid-western region of Ireland. By privileging and valuing SENCOs' and Principals' voices through qualitative methods, this study examined rich stories from the field (Stake, 1995) and situated analysis of participants' stories firmly within the realm of practice. They are context-bound and illuminate how SENCOs and Principals made sense

of their professional worlds. The study used interpretivism to paint texturised and idiosyncratic brushstrokes onto a canvas of what motivated SENCOs and Principals to commit to championing inclusive special education approaches in their schools. It extended knowledge of how the dynamics between SENCOs and Principals' facilitated whole-school responses to change. It additionally provided insights into the ways in which SENCOs conceptualise their role, and identified how schools developed cultures of learning.

In conclusion, while value-laden and idiosyncratic, qualitative research can offer insights which may influence the attitudes and perspectives of others. An exploration of individuals within specific contexts, and the relationship between individuals within and across these contexts, can spotlight the complex relationships between SENCOs' and Principals' identities, their workplaces and their practice. Identifying the dynamics at play in particular schools, and isolating what works for schools in their quest for high quality teaching and learning for all students has the potential to build universal collaborative expertise across the system. Readers of this study may engage in new meaning-making and assimilate knowledge gleaned from peering into the lives of six SENCOs and their Principals in post-primary schools. New interpretations may be derived by readers which are influenced by their own value-laden and subjective responses to the phenomenon and enhance understandings of leadership and management of change, professional identity and their relationship to professional learning.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire for Special Educational Needs

Coordinators

Name: _____ School: _____

This questionnaire seeks information about your school and about your experience as the special educational needs coordinator.

Section ONE: General School Context

Q1.1 School Type-Post-primary: Select all that apply to your school

- Community College
- Community School
- Comprehensive School
- Vocational School
- Free Voluntary Secondary School
- Fee-paying Voluntary Secondary School
- Other (describe): _____

Q1.2a School catchment area; student intake profile. Select all that apply

Students in my school mainly come from

- Upper socio-economic group
- Middle socio-economic group
- Lower socio-economic group

Q1.2b School catchment area; student intake profile. Select all that apply

Students in my school come from

- City suburbs
- Town (under 10,000)
- Town (over 10,000)
- Rural community (under 1,500)
- Inner city community
- Travelling community (approximate number: _____)
- English as a second language community (approximate number: _____)

Q1.3 School Type: Please select all that apply

- Mainstream
- Mainstream with special class or unit
- Disadvantaged status (DEIS)
- Other (please specify) _____

Q1.4 Approximate number of students

- Boys _____
- Girls _____

Q1.5 Approach to school organisation (if relevant)

	Junior Cycle			Senior Cycle		
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Streaming						
Mixed Ability						
Setting by subject						
Other (please give details below)						

Other (please give details here):

Q1.6 Are any of the following programmes available in your school? Select all that apply

- Leaving Certificate Applied
- Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
- Junior Certificate School Programme
- Transition Year
- Other _____

Q1.7 Staff/Teachers associated with special education

- How many **full time** learning support/resource teachers are there in your school? _____
- Approximately how many **part-time** learning support/resource teachers or teachers with learning support/resource hours, are there in your school? _____
- How many Special Needs Assistants are in your school? _____

Q1.8a Approximately how many students are in receipt of Learning Support? _____

Q1.8b How many resource teaching hours in total have been granted by the National Council for Special Education this academic year? _____

Q1.8.c How many students are in receipt of resource teaching hours this academic year for each of the categories of low incidence disability outlined below?

Disability	Number of Students
Physical Disability	
Hearing Impairment	
Visual Impairment	
Emotional Disturbance	
Severe Emotional Disturbance	
Moderate General Learning Disability	
Severe/Profound General Learning Disability	
Autism/Autism Spectrum Disorders	
Specific Speech and Language Disorder	
Assessed syndrome in conjunction with one of the above low incidence disabilities	
Multiple Disabilities	

School Planning for Providing for Students with Special Educational Needs

Q1.9a Does the school have a written policy on provision for students with special educational needs?

- Yes
- No

Q1.9b Select which best describes the organisation of SEN provision in your school

- A written plan
- Known established procedures
- Response to situations as they arise

Q1.9c In the Table below, please tick the four (or fewer) most frequently used procedures in your school to select students for additional help.

	Selection Procedures	Tick most frequently used selection procedure. (Tick maximum of four)
a	Recommendation of subject teacher	
b	Parental concern	
c	Below 10 th percentile on in-school standardised tests	
d	Learning SEN Teacher's assessments	
e	Class based test	
f	Complaints of behavioural disruption to class	
g	Psychologist's report	
h	Entrance examination	
i	Primary school report on transition	
j	Other (please describe below)	

Other (please describe here):

Q1.10a Are there procedures for determining how long learning support/SEN support is provided?

Yes

No

Q1.10b Who decides when support is terminated? _____

Q1.10c Are there specific criteria used to determine termination of support?

Yes

No

Q1.10d If yes, what are the criteria used? Please give a brief general description.

Q1.11 Do you have access to a NEPS psychologist?

Yes

No

Individual Education Planning and Record Keeping

Q1.12a **In the Table below:**

A) Please tick which type of plans are available in your school for students with SEN.

B) Please tick which type of plans (if any) are available to students with High Incidence Disability (e.g. Dyslexia; Borderline/Mild General Learning Disability).

C) Please tick which type of plans (if any) are available to students with Low Incidence Disability (e.g. Assessed Syndromes; Sensory-motor disabilities; Autistic Spectrum Disorders).

D) Please tick if these plans are disseminated to subject teachers.

Type of Plan	A	B	C	D
	Plans devised in school	Students with High Incidence	Students with Low Incidence	Disseminated to subject teachers
IEP				
IPLP (Individual Profile and Learning Programme)				
Group Plan				
Other (please describe below) _____				

Other (please describe here):

Q1.12b If IEPs or equivalent support plans are devised in your school, approximately how many were devised in the school this year? _____

Q1.12c Who in your school was involved in developing the IEPs or equivalent support plans?

PICK ONLY **FOUR** (or fewer) people.

Person	Most likely to be involved Select Four or Fewer People Only
a) Principal	
b) Parents	
c) LS/Resource teachers	
d) Students	
e) Subject teachers	
f) Special Needs Assistant	
g) Class tutor	
h) Year head	
i) Psychologist	
j) Visiting teacher	
k) Other service: _____	
l) Other professionals, e.g. _____	
m) Other (please specify): _____	

In School Support

Q1.13a Is there an SEN support team in your school?

Yes

No

Q1.13b If yes please identify **Four** of the following people in order of the likelihood of their involvement in the support team according to current practice in your school. Please mark X if the post does not exist in your school.

	Members of LS/SEN Support team ONLY PICK 4 people	Membership	X
a	Learning SEN Teachers		
b	Resource teachers		
c	Subject teachers (specify area)		
d	Home School Liaison teachers		
e	Principal		
f	Deputy Principal		
g	Year head		
h	Class tutor		
i	Other (please specify)		

Q1.19b How often do these people meet?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Other (please state how often): _____

Q1.19c Is this meeting time recognised as part of the teachers' expected working hours ?

- Yes
- No

Section TWO: Some information about you and your role as the special educational needs coordinator

Q2.1a Personal Information

- Female
- Male

- Number of years teaching experience: _____
- Years' experience in LS/SEN: _____
- Years' experience as SENCO: _____
- Initial Qualification: _____

Q2.1b Subject specialism _____

Q2.1c How many contact teaching hours do you have in the week? _____

Q2.1d How many hours are assigned to learning support/resource teaching? _____

Q2.2 Do you see yourself primarily as a

- Learning SEN Teacher
- Resource/Special Educational Needs teacher
- SEN Coordinator
- Other (please specify): _____

Q2.3 Did you actively seek to become the special educational needs coordinator in your school?

Yes

No

Q2.4 What motivates you to work in the area of special education?

Q2.5a Have you been given a post of responsibility to coordinate special education provision in your school?

Yes

No

Q2.5b If yes please select one option below:

- Assistant Principal post (A post)
- Special Duties post (B post)
- Deputy Principal
- Other (please specify) _____

Q2.5c How does having a post of responsibility or not having a post of responsibility impact on your role?

Q2.6 In the Table below possible aspects of the roles and responsibilities of the SEN Coordinator are identified.

Please indicate the relative importance of the following possible aspects of your current workload in column A.

Use the scale **1-5** (1= most important-5= least important aspect of my job)

	My Roles and Responsibilities as SEN Coordinator in my school	A				
		Currently how important are they?				
a	Withdrawal of students for individual instruction	1	2	3	4	5
b	Withdrawal of students for small group instruction	1	2	3	4	5
c	Collaborating with other teachers	1	2	3	4	5
d	Preparing resources and subject materials for differentiated in-class teaching	1	2	3	4	5
e	Preparing resources and subject materials for individualised or small group instruction	1	2	3	4	5
f	Liaison with parents	1	2	3	4	5
g	Liaison with Principal on SEN issues	1	2	3	4	5
h	Record keeping	1	2	3	4	5
i	Report writing	1	2	3	4	5

j	Applications for RACE (Reasonable Accommodations in Certified Exams)	1	2	3	4	5
k	Applications for subject exemptions	1	2	3	4	5
l	Identification of students with SEN	1	2	3	4	5
m	Administration of screening/diagnostic tests	1	2	3	4	5
n	Coordination of IEP meetings	1	2	3	4	5
o	Formulation of IEPs	1	2	3	4	5
p	Implementation of IEPs	1	2	3	4	5
q	Review of IEPs	1	2	3	4	5
r	Monitoring of student progress	1	2	3	4	5
s	Re-assessment of student progress as appropriate	1	2	3	4	5
t	Timetabling of additional support for students with SEN	1	2	3	4	5
u	Coordination and allocation of SNA duties	1	2	3	4	5
v	Provision of substitute cover for absent colleagues	1	2	3	4	5
w	Formulation of school plan on SEN/Inclusion	1	2	3	4	5
x	Implementation of school plan on SEN/Inclusion	1	2	3	4	5
y	Staff consultant on SEN issues	1	2	3	4	5
z	Liaison with SENO (NCSE)	1	2	3	4	5
ℒ	Liaison with psychological services	1	2	3	4	5
Ũ	Liaison with external professionals (social workers, therapists, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
Σ	Liaison with Inspectorate	1	2	3	4	5
ℒ	Liaison with feeder/follow-on schools	1	2	3	4	5
Ψ	Provision of staff development/in-service training	1	2	3	4	5
Ω	Cooperative teaching for students with SEN	1	2	3	4	5
β	Whole school leadership in SEN	1	2	3	4	5
	Whole school management and responsibility for SEN provision	1	2	3	4	5
	Other (please add and then rate) _____	1	2	3	4	5

Professional Development in Special Education

Q2.7a Have you ever had any in-service/professional development in the area of Learning Support/SEN?

Yes

No

Q.2.7b If yes please describe they types of in-service you have engaged with.

Q2.8 Do you have a qualification in Learning Support/SEN?

Yes (please specify) _____

No

Section THREE: Your perceptions about your role

Please circle the number that best represents your opinion about each of the statements.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree

		Strongly	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly
1	I am confident in my role.	1	2	3	4	5
2	I enjoy my role.	1	2	3	4	5
3	I consider myself an 'expert' in special education.	1	2	3	4	5
4	Others in the school consider me an 'expert' in special education.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I am effective in my role as SEN coordinator.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I am an effective teacher.	1	2	3	4	5
7	I can make learning accessible for all students in my classroom.	1	2	3	4	5

8	I can improve the learning of a student who is failing.	1	2	3	4	5
9	I can make parents feel comfortable coming to school.	1	2	3	4	5
10	I can assist families in helping their children do well in school.	1	2	3	4	5
11	I am confident to offer advice to other teachers about students with special educational needs.	1	2	3	4	5
12	I can collaborate with other professionals (e.g. educational psychologists or speech and language therapists) in designing educational plans for students with disabilities.	1	2	3	4	5
13	There is strong leadership in my school that promotes a whole school approach to including students with special educational needs.	1	2	3	4	5
14	I feel supported in my role by the Principal.	1	2	3	4	5
15	Staff in my school are committed to providing inclusive education to students with special educational needs.	1	2	3	4	5

Thank you sincerely for completing this questionnaire.

Your time, commitment and effort are very much appreciated.

- Section One questions are adapted with kind permission from O’Gorman, E. and Drudy, S. (2011). *Professional Development for Teachers Working in the Area of Special Education/Inclusion in Mainstream Schools: The Views of Teachers and Other Stakeholders*. [Online] Submitted to the National Council for Special Education.
- Section Two questions are adapted with kind permission from O’Gorman, E. and Drudy, S. (2011). *Professional Development for Teachers Working in the Area of Special Education/Inclusion in Mainstream Schools: The Views of Teachers and Other Stakeholders*. [Online] Submitted to the National Council for Special Education.
- Section Three scale is adapted with kind permission from Sharma, U., Loreman, T., and Forlin, C. (2012). ‘Measuring teacher efficacy to implement inclusive practices’. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Need*, 12(1), 12-21.

Appendix B: Model of Inclusive Special Education

Guiding Principle: Implementing Effective Practice

Key Elements:

- Established research-based practice (Mitchell, 2014; Salend and Whittaker, 2012).
- Strengths-based approaches-using IEPs and assessment to identify strengths and inform teaching.
- Systems such as Response to Intervention (Burns and Gibbons, 2008), Universal Design for Learning (King-Sears, 2009) and Positive Interventions and Supports (PBIS)(Savage et al, 2011) are used.
- Use of assistive technology, peer tutoring, cooperative learning and teaching of meta-cognitive strategies are used to maximise learning.
- Close collaborative partnership with parents and other professionals.
- Use culturally relevant and responsive interventions (Habib et al., 2013).

Guiding Principle: Offer a Continuum of Placement Options

Key Elements:

- Recognises that most learners can be educated effectively in mainstream classrooms.
- Minority of learners with more complex SEN could benefit more from placement in resource rooms, special classes or special schools for some or all of the time (Kauffman and Badar, 2014; NCSE, 2010).
- Continuum of placements is necessary to cater for students' needs ranging from full-time placement in mainstream education to full-time placement in special school or residential school.
- **The continuum of placement options should allow movement between various placements to ensure the most appropriate option.**

Guiding Principle: Organisation for providing optimal education for learners with SEN

Key Elements:

- Policy needs to be underpinned by principles of inclusive special education.
- Statutory guidelines need to be in place with mechanisms such as school inspections to ensure implementation at regional level.
- Procedures for identification and assessment of SEN, evaluation of effectiveness of interventions and monitoring and review of student progress based on IEPs.
- Effective organisational systems need to be embedded in schools (Ekins, 2013) and should be implemented by qualified members of SEN teams.
- Schools could ensure that school-wide practices are based on research evidence of effectiveness in facilitating academic and social development of learners with SEND (Hornby et al, 2013).
- All teachers should be able to identify learners with SEN and should use evidenced-based strategies and approaches, such as cooperative learning to optimise learning and participation for students with SEN.

Guiding Principle: Close collaboration between mainstream and special schools and classes

Key Elements:

- There are two roles for special schools:
 1. As providers of special education for students with more severe levels of SEN.
 2. As providers of guidance and support to assist mainstream schools (Ekins, 2013).

Collaboration between both settings is essential but will require teachers to develop inter-personal skills necessary for effective consultation and collaboration (Hornby, 2014).

Guiding Principle: Focus on including as many students with SEN in mainstream schools

Key Elements:

- To educate as many students as possible in mainstream schools, developing knowledge, skills and understanding of teachers is essential.
- Factors considered essential to successful inclusion include:
 - Having high expectations for all learners
 - Using collaboration and differentiation in the classroom
 - Access to ongoing high quality CPD

- Efficient and flexible use of resources
- Utilising distributed leadership and shared decision-making
- Using comprehensive data systems to monitor student progress
- Developing partnership skills to work effectively with parents and other professionals.

(EADSNE, 2012; Farrell et al, 2007)

Appendix C: The Post of Responsibility Structure in Irish Post Primary Schools

The Post of Responsibility is an in-school management system whereby a number of teachers are given supplementary remuneration to carry out specified tasks, duties and responsibilities of a curricular, administrative or pastoral nature. . Two categories of posts exist; Assistant Principal and Special Duties and duties assigned to either should have a level of workload and responsibility commensurate with the category. The Assistant Principal post holds an additional salary allowance of approximately €9,000 per annum and the Special Duties allowance is approximately €5,000 per annum. Teachers in receipt of either of these allowances are required to fulfil duties and take responsibilities in addition to their full teaching hours. The duties attached to the post are defined by the Board of Management following a consultation process involving all the staff. The consultation process includes an analysis of the school needs, agreement on the priorities and the drawing up of a “Schedule of posts” to match the agreed priorities. Each school is allocated a specific number of Special Duties and Assistant Principal Posts on the basis of school size, according to a formula based on the number of whole-time teachers in the school.

Appointment to a post of responsibility is by competitive interview among the teachers already employed in the school, whether full time or part time, permanent or temporary. Selection criteria have been agreed at national level and include:

- Seniority (years of service within the school)
- Knowledge, understanding and capacity to meet the needs of the job
- Capacity to contribute to the overall development of the school
- Interpersonal and communication skills
- Capacity to contribute to the overall organisation and management of the school

Source: DES Circular Letter 0025/2016 *Promotion and Appeal Procedures for appointment to Assistant Principal, Special Duties Teacher and Programme Co-ordinator*

Appendix D: Brief Pen Portraits of Participants

School A

The SENCO and SEN Team

The SENCO (S1) initially trained as an English, History and Geography teacher and has been teaching for 36 years. She has been teaching in SEN for 25 years and has been the SENCO for 15 years. She holds a postgraduate qualification in SEN. She works part-time and is contracted for 11 hours per week but spends 20 hours on site and is the only SENCO in the study with no teaching responsibilities. Her role is dedicated to coordination of SEN provision and for this she was appointed to Assistant Principal. The core SEN team includes 20 teachers but there were close to 60 teachers involved in the delivery of special education teaching. The school also has ten SNAs, eight full-time and two part-time.

The Principal

The Principal has been a member of the teaching staff in the school for 26 years. She was appointed to the role of Principal four years ago. Interestingly, in such a large school, she also chose to teach mathematics part-time as she enjoyed it and felt it kept her connected to students.

School B

The SENCO and SEN Team

The SENCO (S2) originally trained as an Art teacher and has 11 years teaching experience. Her teaching career began in her current school and she has always combined her Art teaching with support teaching. She obtained a postgraduate qualification in educational psychology prior to her appointment in the school. She holds an Assistant Principal post and is one of twenty teachers involved in the part-time delivery of special education in the school. There are no teachers involved in special education in a full-time teaching capacity.

The Principal

The Principal in School B had been teaching in the school for more than two decades. She was the deputy Principal for a number of years before being appointed to the role of Principal four years ago.

School C

The SENCO and SEN Team

The SENCO (S3) has 30 years teaching experience, with 23 involved in support teaching in both the UK and Ireland. She was appointed to the SENCO role 7 years ago and has been teaching in her current school for 8 years. She was the only SENCO in the study without a post of responsibility. She is the only full-time SEN Teacher in the school. There are seven other subject teachers involved in a part-time capacity.

The Principal

The Principal in School C originally taught Irish in a large community school in Dublin before being appointed to the role of teaching Principal in a rural small school in the West of Ireland. He has been the Principal in School C for the past four years.

School D

The SENCO and SEN Team

The SENCO (S4) has been teaching for 21 years and originally qualified as a French and Gaeilge (Irish language) teacher. She has been the SENCO for the past 7 years in her current school. She holds a postgraduate qualification in SEN and has an Assistant Principal post for her role but also acts as a year head. There were no full-time teachers working in SEN but 18 other teachers provided special education on a part-time basis in conjunction with their mainstream subject teaching commitments. The school has two SNAs.

The Principal

The Principal in School D originally taught Irish and Geography and also holds a postgraduate qualification in ICT. He taught in various schools around Ireland for less than a decade before accepting his appointment as Principal of this new school in 2006.

School E

The SENCO and SEN Team

The SENCO (S5) has been teaching for 33 years and has been teaching in SEN since her career began. She originally qualified as a History teacher and continues to teach mainstream History in her current school. She holds a postgraduate level qualification in SEN and was amongst the first cohort of teachers to graduate from SEN course back in the 1970s. She spends considerable time teaching in the special class for students with MGLD. There are seven full-time SEN Teachers providing additional support to students with SEN. Furthermore, many other teachers are involved on a part-time basis.

The Principal

The Principal in School E originally trained as a Catechetic and English teacher and started teaching in the 1980's. She was the deputy Principal in her current school for 12 years before being appointed to the Principal role six years ago. Since her appointment she has opened an additional special classes for students with ASD.

School F

The SENCO (and Principal) and SEN Team

The SENCO (P6) was also the school Principal (and school secretary!). He originally qualified as Technology teacher in 1989 and began his teaching career in his current school. After 19 years he was appointed to the role of deputy Principal and four years later became the Principal. He has been leading the school for four years. The academic year 2015/2016 witnessed the first ever appointment of a dedicated resource teacher to the school. A further four teachers were

involved in the delivery of special education in a part-time capacity. The school also had one SNA.

The SEN Teacher

The SEN Teacher in School F was coming to the end of her first year of teaching in this school. She is a recently qualified Business Studies and Religious Education teacher (5 years) and spent three years teaching abroad. She was appointed as a resource teacher in her current school on a temporary contract and all her teaching hours are dedicated to working with students with SEN. While currently not qualified in SEN, she applied to study the DES funded postgraduate diploma in SEN but despite meeting all entry requirements, was unsuccessful in her application due to the limited number of places available on the course. She indicated that she would reapply the following year.

Appendix E: SENCO Information and Consent Form

The Role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator in Post-Primary Schools

Dear XXXX,

Firstly I would like to take the opportunity to thank you again for your participation in the initial phase of my research relating to the role of the SENCO and I hope you found some of the findings and recommendations interesting and helpful. As you will recall I am a lecturer in the Department of Special Education in Mary Immaculate College and I am undertaking doctoral research at University College London Institute of Education. Following the initial phase of my research I am now interested in conducting a more detailed study which will explore the SENCO role in six schools. I am hoping to capture stories and experiences from SENCOs and Principals about the coordination of special and inclusive education. As policy specific to SEN is due to undergo further transformation, it is an opportune time to collect 'stories from the field' which will hopefully inform policy development and formalisation of the SENCO role and also provide some guidance for you and your Principal.

Your participation in the next phase of research would be greatly appreciated and would considerably enhance this research project. Participation will be entirely voluntary, you will be free to refuse to answer any question and you may choose to withdraw from the project at any time. If you agree to participate the process will comprise a half day visit to your school at a time that will be suited to you. During this visit, I will engage in an interview with you that should last approximately one hour. I would also like to have a tour of the school and review school documents related to special and inclusive education.

It will be necessary to audio-record all of the interviews to ensure that all of the information is retained. All data will be closely examined to identify the themes and issues emerging from the research.

Electronic and written information will be kept strictly confidential, subject to the limitations of the law, and will be available only to me. Excerpts from data collected during the research process may be used in the final thesis, but under no circumstances will your name or any identifying characteristic be included. Data collected for the research will be stored securely on a password protected computer and in locked cabinets. All data will be destroyed after a period of five-years. Data may be used in an anonymous form in any publications that arise from this research.

I would be grateful if you would consider this request with your Principal, XXXX. If both of you agree to participate can you please sign the attached consent forms and I will collect them when I visit.

I would like to thank you for your interest in this research and hopefully look forward to meeting with you soon.

In the meantime please do not hesitate to contact me on 061-204517 if you have any queries.

Is mise le meas,

Johanna Fitzgerald

The Role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator in Post-Primary Schools

SENCO Consent Form

Name: _____

School: _____

Phone: _____

E-mail: _____

I am willing to participate in the research study exploring the role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator being conducted by Johanna Fitzgerald, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. I have been given sufficient information about the project and I understand the nature of the research project. I am satisfied that data can be used in anonymous form in any publications that arise from this project.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F: Principal Information and Consent Form

The Role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator in Post-Primary Schools

Dear XXXX,

Firstly I would like to take the opportunity to thank you again for facilitating your SENCO's participation in the initial phase of my research relating to the role of the SENCO. As you will recall I am a lecturer in the Department of Special Education in Mary Immaculate College and I am undertaking doctoral research at University College London Institute of Education. Following the initial phase of my research I am now interested in conducting a more detailed study which will explore the SENCO role in six schools. I am hoping to capture experiences from SENCOs and Principals about the coordination of special and inclusive education. As policy specific to SEN is due to undergo further transformation, it is an opportune time to collect 'stories from the field' which will hopefully inform policy development and formalisation of the SENCO role and also provide some guidance for you and your SENCO.

Your participation in the research would be greatly appreciated and would considerably enhance this research project. Your participation will be entirely voluntary, you will be free to refuse to answer any question and you may choose to withdraw from the project at any time. If you agree to participate the process will comprise a half day visit to your school at a time that will be suited to you. During this visit, I will engage in an interview with you that should last approximately one hour. I would also like to have a tour of the school and review school documents related to special and inclusive education.

It will be necessary to audio-record all of the interviews to ensure that all of the information is retained. All data will be closely examined to identify the themes and issues emerging from the research.

Electronic and written information will be kept strictly confidential, subject to the limitations of the law, and will be available only to me. Excerpts from data collected during the research process may be used in the final thesis, but under no circumstances will your name or any identifying characteristic be included. Data collected for the research will be stored securely on a password protected computer and in locked cabinets. All data will be destroyed after a period of five-years. Data may be used in an anonymous form in any publications that arise from this research.

I would be grateful if you would consider this request with XXXX. If both of you agree to participate can you please sign the attached consent form and I will collect it when I visit.

I would like to thank you for your interest in this research and hopefully look forward to meeting with you.

In the meantime please do not hesitate to contact me on 061-204517 if you have any queries.

Is mise le meas,

Johanna Fitzgerald

Principal Consent Form

Name: _____

School: _____

Phone: _____

E-mail: _____

I am willing to participate in the research study exploring the role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator being conducted by Johanna Fitzgerald, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. I have been given sufficient information about the project and I understand the nature of the research project. I am satisfied that data can be used in anonymous form in any publications that arise from this project.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix G: SENCO Interview Schedule

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

General Questions

1. Tell me about your teaching experience in general-previous schools, qualifications
2. Tell me about how you became SENCO and why you do the job.

School Context

3. Tell me about the ethos of the school-is there an inclusive ethos? How is this evident?
4. Tell me about the students, where do they come from? Describe the mix.
5. Do you think students with SEN are well served in the school? Are they making progress? How do you know?
6. How are students with SEN supported? Prompt for specific examples-models of provision/screening assessments/supports available/how is progress monitored and measured?/IEPs?
7. In your opinion, what are the key benefits of including students with SEN in the school?
8. In your opinion, what are the key challenges to including students with SEN in your school?
9. Do you encounter any challenges in fulfilling the role?
10. What does or would support you in fulfilling the role?
11. In your opinion, how supportive are staff in general, to including students with SEN in the school?

SENCO Role-Responsibilities

12. Tell me about your role as SENCO? What do you do?
13. What are your main priorities/responsibilities?

14. Is this what you think you should be doing? What informs this? Are there other duties you feel you should have? Or are there responsibilities that you currently have that you feel you shouldn't?

15. Has your role changed in any way? Have any policies impacted on or altered your role as SENCO?

SENCO Identity

16. Do you see yourself primarily as a: Learning SEN Teacher/Resource/Special Educational Needs teacher/SEN Coordinator or something else?

17. What shapes this perception?

18. How do you think others in the school view your role?

19. Are you confident in your role? Why/why not?

20. Do you think you are effective in your role? How do you measure this?

Leadership in SEN

21. Do you consider yourself to be the leader of SEN in the school? Why? Why not?

22. What does leadership in SEN mean to you? What does it look like?

23. Would you be/are you comfortable with having a leadership role?

24. Do you think there should be a leader of SEN in the school? Why/why not? Who should it be?

Leading Change

25. Can you tell me what you know about the new proposed model of SEN resource allocation

26. What implications will this have for your role as SENCO?

27. Who do you think will lead and manage implementation of changes to special education in your school once the new model is implemented?

SENCO Professional Development

28. Is in-service education in the area of special education readily available and easy to access?

29. Have you engaged in any specific CPD to support you in your role?

30. To what extent is in-service education effective in supporting you in your role as SENCO?

31. How are you supported to pursue in-service education in this area?

32. Are there opportunities for you to share your expertise in this area with your colleagues?

Staff Development

33. Is in-service education in the area of special education readily available and easy to access for all staff?

34. How are staff supported to pursue in-service education in this area?

35. Is staff development in the area of SEN and inclusive education prioritised?

Whole School Approach

36. Are there school-wide systems in place to communicate information about students with special educational needs
Are there school-wide systems in place to promote teaching and learning for students with SEN?

Conclusion

37. If you could make recommendations to the Minister for Education about the SENCO role, what would you say?

38. Is there anything else you want to tell me about that I haven't already asked, but that you feel is important?

Appendix H: Principal Interview Schedule

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule
General Questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How long have you been Principal here?2. Tell me a little about your own teaching background-subjects, roles etc.3. Do you enjoy your role?
School Context
<ol style="list-style-type: none">4. Tell me about the ethos of the school-is there an inclusive ethos? How is this evident?5. Do you think students with SEN are well served in the school? Are they making progress? How do you know?6. In your opinion, what are the key benefits of including students with SEN in the school?7. In your opinion, what are the key challenges to including students with SEN in your school?8. In your opinion, how supportive are staff in general, to including students with SEN in the school?9. What is the role of the Board of Management in supporting SEN provision in your school?
SENCO Role-Responsibilities from Principal's perspective
<ol style="list-style-type: none">10. Tell me about the role of the SENCO? What does she/he do? Prompts could include:<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. administrative responsibilities-screening/assessment/timetabling/IEPsb. teaching-withdrawal/in-classc. management responsibilities-SNA's, other SEN Teachers

- d. Leadership-member of management?
- e. Collaboration-with external professionals/school staff and parents
- f. Consultation with colleagues-providing support/guidance to staff.

11. Is this what you think the SENCO should be doing? What informs this? Are there other duties you feel she/he should have? Or are there responsibilities the SENCO currently has that you feel they shouldn't?

12. Do the duties of your SENCO support you in your role as Principal? If so, how?

13. Do you think your SENCO has enough support in the role? Explain. Prompts could include:

- a. Is there support in the form of policy guidance? Are you aware of any policy guidance related to the role?
- b. What support is available in school to assist the SENCO?
- c. Does the school have sufficient access to external support agencies/resources etc.?

Challenges

14. Do you as the Principal encounter any challenges with the coordination of SEN in your school? Explain.

15. Do you think your SENCO encounters any challenges in trying to coordinate SEN provision? Explain.

16. How do you overcome these challenges or at the very least deal with them?

Leadership in SEN

17. Who takes a lead on SEN in your school? Who should take a lead?

18. What does leadership in SEN mean to you?

Leading Change

19. Can you tell me what you know about the new proposed model of SEN resource allocation? Prompt: If unaware of new model I will provide a brief overview.

20. What implications will this have for your school and the role of your SENCO?
21. Significant changes have occurred at post-primary level in recent years in many aspects and not just in relation to SEN. How have you led and managed these changes?
22. Who will lead and manage implementation of changes to special education once the new model is implemented?
23. Are there systems in place to support staff in dealing with change? Prompts could include:
 - a. Opportunities for staff to meet and discuss implications of change-staff meetings for example.
 - b. Opportunities to problem solve together
 - c. Opportunities for staff to share good practice both within and between schools.

SENCO & Principal Professional Development

1. Have you engaged in any CPD for Principals (either formally accredited or informally) that support you in leading and implementing inclusive approaches to SEN? Prompts could include:
 - a. Does your management board (e.g. JMB support etc.)
2. How do you support your staff, including your SENCO, to pursue in-service education in this area?
3. Are there opportunities for staff, including members of the SEN team to share their expertise in this area with colleagues? If so, how is this facilitated?

Staff Development

4. Is in-service education in the area of special education readily available and easy to access for all staff? Is it a priority?
5. How do you decide upon staff development priorities?

Whole School Approach

6. Are there school-wide systems in place to communicate information about students with special educational needs? Prompts could include:
 - a. Standing agenda items on staff meetings
 - b. Scheduled SEN team meetings
 - c. Electronic portal/information sharing
 - d. Cascading of CPD specific training
 - e. Standing agenda items on subject departmental meetings
 - f. Allocation of resources
7. Are there school-wide systems in place to promote teaching and learning for students with SEN?

Conclusion

8. If you could make recommendations to the Minister for Education about the SENCO role, what would you say?
9. Is there anything else you want to tell me about that I haven't already asked, but that you feel is important?

Appendix I: Data Analysis

Theme generation 'Complexities of the SENCO Role

Phase 1: Transcription

Various excerpts taken from interview with S1, School A. Researcher questions and comments are highlighted in bold.

So when do you do the admin?

Well you see I do it at home, or the timetable, I do it in the month of July. I've put in about 14 years, so it's a huge grief to be honest. I think there must be a huge question mark over it long term. I'm coming towards the end of my career, but for younger people coming up, we've almost been like, what the word, I almost said pioneer.

Well yes, you seem to have systems in place for a long time?

Well I've been putting systems in constantly, reviewing them and changing them. But it's fiercely demanding and the fact the job doesn't exist.

You know the way you are fulltime in SEN coordination now, how long have you been full time? When did you step out of the classroom?

It must be at this stage, about 10 years.

Where do those coordinating hours come from? Do they come from the resource allocation?

They do you see. That's the other issue that we have with it, right? So my hours come out in that allocation, maybe 8 to 10 years. Originally, when I was teaching first, I was teaching and doing special needs, then when I was job sharing, I was still doing learning support and

coordinating, then it became so big. Now some schools mightn't have given it to you, but we constantly made cases that we couldn't find the service, and in fairness our management listen. It's still arduous.

You know the way you were saying there are core teams, of 5. Do they have coordination hours too?

They also have hours, so what happens is they get 5 periods a week. 2 of them get 5 hours, the others have more. The other 2 probably have 10 periods a week. So there's quite an amount of time. The other would have 10, and two have 5. So that's 30 periods a week. Then there's my 16. So 46 periods a week.

NEW EXCERPT SECTION

Tell me about your role as SENCO?

In a way it's probably a more difficult role than deputy Principals because of the fact that the detail of the disabilities. Every child you're managing is unique. And every situation they bring to it is unique. They are all to greater or lesser degrees, complex. I think that the devil is in the detail, and unfortunately, one isn't always able to focus in, to the need of the detail, because there just isn't physically the time. I have 300 pupils on file right? 100 of those are low incident. There's 100 and more, maybe 150 high incidence. Then you have a whole other group of people, they don't come into the category, but they all have special needs. Mental health, anxiety, physical issues. Then we have the new people coming online. New disabilities. New referrals. You cannot, there is no way, even with those hours, that you can actually be okay with all those children. You just can't.

Is that why you delegate?

See it's impossible. We do delegate. I do the timetable in July, and I devise...

Do you do that by yourself?

Yeah. That's a good solid 3 weeks work. 7 or 8 or 9 hours a day

There are 80 teachers?

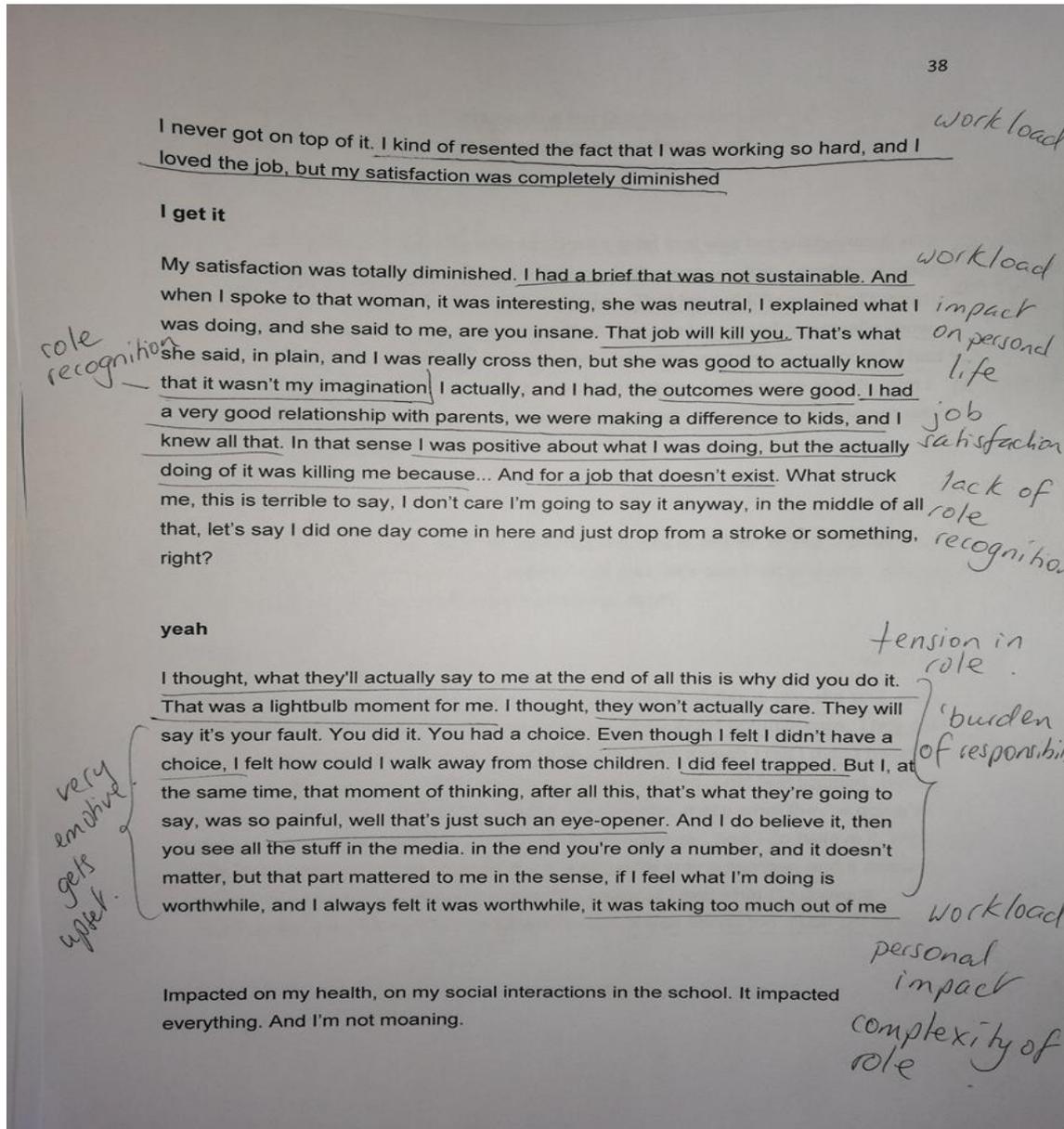
80 or 90

How many hours do you have to coordinate?

300 hours. And that's spread across that. Then as well I go through the timetable for the SNA's, and there's 9 SNA's. They could have 3 or 4 students each. I do it for each of these students and write into their timetables, all the resource teachers who are working with them so that when an SNA comes back, she knows before she leaves who she has, but when she comes back I give her the timetable so she knows what classes her students are in as well.

Phase 2: Systematic Open Coding

Repeated reading of all transcripts was undertaken. In Phase 2 audio recordings of interviews were listened to in tandem with open coding. Following open coding of interviews in each school, summary memos were written with initial interpretations.



bringing people along / involving them

uses we, us, team throughout collaborative

explained to people that we have issues with it, and we have explained that it is not mandatory. We have explained what we want, we do it because we feel its best practice for the children, and its best practice for ourselves. These children have very definite needs, we have to identify what these needs are and put them on paper. For everybody that's involved, the people who follow on from you, we have to have a record. Nobody has ever actually, but I think maybe because we spell it out, and we give people time. I think because it's all on the cloud and because we archive the people who are leaving, and if you're taking up a 2nd, 3rd, or 4th year, the information is there. And then we do synopsis in the files. I think they know that we're trying to help and that, you know what I mean?

leadership

specialist knowledge

Systems ICT

accountab?

yeah

communication

advocacy

motivation

It's a 2 way system. Whatever it is, it's for children. It's to make it work. And I think we've got that across, s we've not had the resistance. It's started too when it was small, say I'm 25 years doing this. We started the idea of IEP's 20 years ago.

experience

NEPS come in and did a workshop, and then asked me to do a follow up workshop with a few others. Those people are still with me. It's grown over the years. But we've always been honest with them, because I've always had an issue with it. I don't like, I have battled my entire career doing a job that has no job description. And it has created major stresses on occasion. and I have present that too if I'm completely honest, because it can make people unwell, having so much work to do and no time to do it => negative impact on life.

incremental increase in workload. lack of recognition.

school culture

Has the job impacted on you in any other ways?

personal sacrifices because of role.

time pace

You see not having the right time, it was like I said to someday once, I actually love the work, but why do I have to work under pressure every minute of the day I'm here, and have for 20 years. When I go into the staffroom to have a cup of tea, people will say I've never seen you in the staffroom. I've been here 20 years but I couldn't find a drawer in the staffroom to find the cutlery. That's how bad it is. I've been in there for break maybe 10 times in 20 years

impact

What?!

SUMMARY MEMO

Excerpt from summary memo with some initial interpretations about SENCO role.

SENCO sees herself very much as a teacher. But concerned with ensuring others are implementing best practice-SENCO as Auditor? Feels she has to challenge attitudes, drive the agenda. Advocate for students with SEN. Personal motivations she has a child herself with SEN. Interested. Wants to make a difference. Professionalism very important. Thinks expertise and CPD essential to carry out the role. Comfortable with a leadership role. Feels like she needs to inform others of policy. Get the sense that she is frustrated by others attitudes at times. But she is brave and confident and will challenge teachers. Sees herself as an administrator, coordinator. Works closely with SNA's. Doesn't really have a SEN team-30 other teachers involved in casual SEN teaching but no core team. Only meet infrequently throughout the year. Makes sure she has her IEPs, policies and profiles documented. But I get the sense she feels she puts in all this effort for what? Do teachers really read it? She doesn't feel that learning outcomes are truly measured for students as she doesn't have time. Very comfortable to provide whole staff CPD-sees herself as a knowledgeable guide. Having done PGDSEN has shaped this identity-she has the specialist expertise.

Constantly feels she has to advocate for students-especially those with behavioural difficulties.

This is an academic school-high achievers. Do staff take ownership of SEN-I'm not sure

SENCO believes they do. Many will refer students if they are underperforming with the perception that students must have SEN. But often they don't.

SENCO is an excellent administrator. Very organised. Excellent systems in place.

Very comfortable being the leader of SEN. I think she equates leadership with advocacy and expertise. In response to question, 'do you see yourself as leader of SEN?' she said 'Yeah, any of the ones with special needs, if they get in trouble, they come to me. That's expected. You don't go with the sanctions, there are considerations.' When asked if she was happy with this she said 'Oh yeah, otherwise there's nobody looking after them.' Feels supported by Principal. Says 'it's on the agenda'. I'm backed up'. I also got the sense that the Principal has elevated her status-values her as leader/coordinator of SEN. I think the biggest challenge for SENCO is trying to influence the attitudes of some teachers. Says most are great but others do feel students with SEN don't belong. Principal also acknowledges that some staff have this perception but would challenge them on it. But SENCO sees her role as 'continuing to raise awareness, keep people with you, and that it's backed up' by the Principal.

Phase 3-Categorisation of codes into themes

Phase 4-Generating a thematic map of analysis and reviewing themes

A codebook was developed following intensive reading and facilitated data reduction. Every code generated was categorised and eventually mapped to key themes. Illustrative raw data were assigned to themes and it was this codebook which was used to guide the write up of findings. An excerpt is outlined below.

Codes	Categories & Themes	Illustrative Data
Time management Managing SNAs Managing increasing workload/role expansion Admin-RACE, DARE, IEPs, meetings, timetabling (90 teachers involved in SEN S1)	Categories: Workload Lack of Formal Role Recognition Themes: Complexities of SENCO role	Workload: [S1] and myself have spoken a lot... a lot, about her workload, and about delegating to others and allowing others to take on responsibilities. While [S1] has to know what is going on, she doesn't necessarily have to be involved in all of the areas, you know (P1, p.6). This year I had 50 referrals, so that was 100 meetings, a meeting to meet them first, and a meeting to meet them back. the reason why the meeting back is so important is that I'm then taking the info from the parent, with that information, we have a school memo....I would put that info through email in the school memo, so the teachers would be advice that the student

<p>RACE procedures (S5, p22)</p> <p>Timetabling issues related to specialist support (i.e. targeted maths support needs a maths teacher-Grind culture? S2, S4))</p> <p>Lack of awareness/understanding from staff (S4,S6)</p> <p>Delegation</p> <p>Communication/dissemination of info</p> <p>Unreasonable expectations of parents</p> <p>Pressure from parents (e.g. RACE applications S5,p21)</p>		<p>has a difficulty, and they would come up with suggestions then, that they need to be supported in the class. (S1, p.18)</p> <p>Yeah I'm in at 8 in the morning, some days I work 'til 1.30, 2.30 or 3. I don't really take breaks though. We're too busy. So I probably do the bones of 20 hours (S1, p.22)</p> <p>In a way it's probably a more difficult role than deputy Principals because of the fact that the detail of the disabilities. Every child you're managing is unique. And every situation they bring to it is unique. They are all to greater or lesser degrees, complex. I think that the devil is in the detail, and unfortunately, one isn't always able to focus in, to the need of the detail, because there just isn't physically the time. I have 300 pupils on file right? 100 of those are low incidence. There's 100 and more, maybe 150 high incidence. Then you have a whole other people, they don't come into the category, but they all have special need. Mental health, anxiety, physical issue. Then we have the new people coming on line. New disabilities. New referrals. You cannot, there is no way, even with those hours, that you can actually be okay with all those children. You just can't. (S1, p.24)</p> <p>SENCO role evolution & workload: There was an opening here, a remedial teacher left. I came here and I stayed here. A life-time ago There was a class with mild learning disabilities that was set up 5 years before. It was here 40 years It must be. I came here and there was a class that had no books, no bags. Nothing. They came from the local national school and they were</p>
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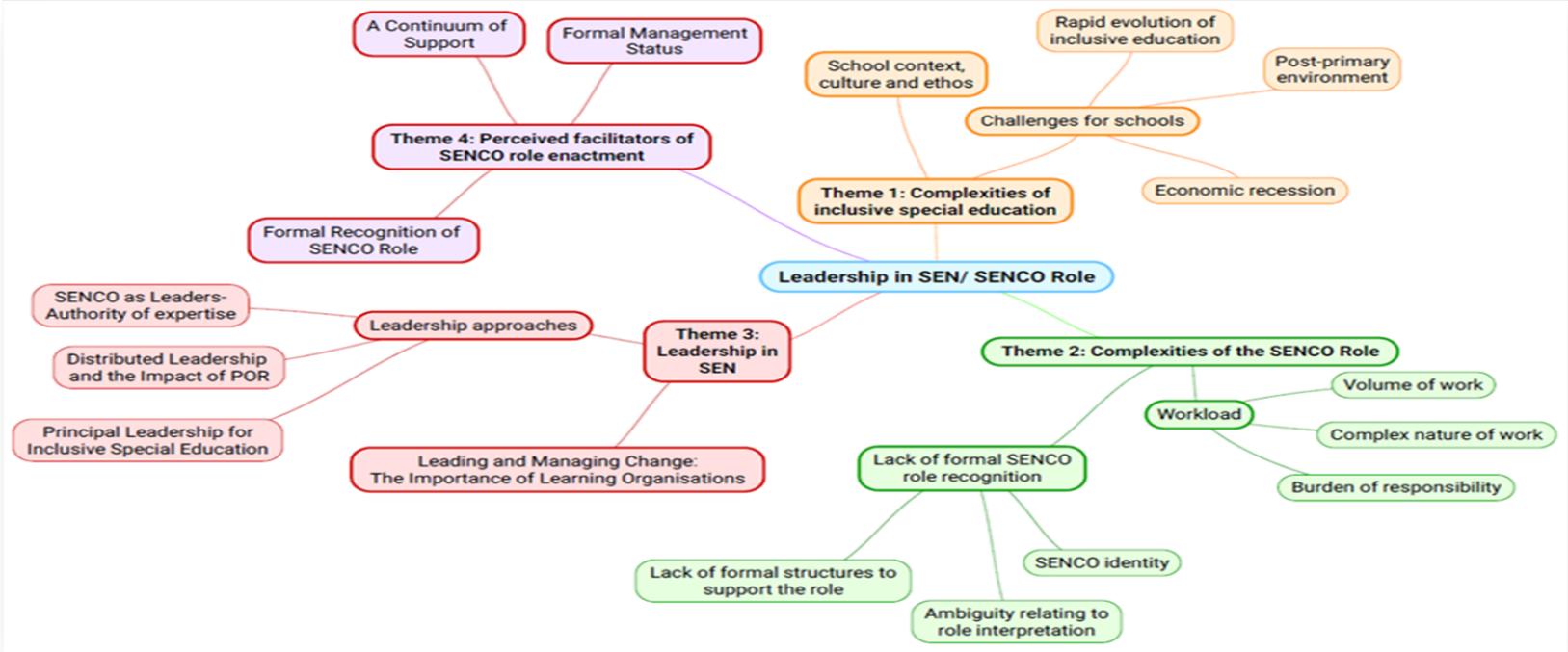
<p>Inequity in current system- paying for private assessments/process</p> <p>Time to meet with parents (S1)</p> <p>Isolation (e.g. S1)</p> <p>Burden of responsibility</p> <p>Dealing with colleagues- getting teachers to engage with IEPs (S1)</p> <p>IEPs-evaluation and review not happening (S1,S3)</p> <p>Lack of formal SENCO role recognition (S1&P1)</p> <p>Danger in formalising SENCO role (P2)</p> <p>Personal sacrifices because of the role</p> <p>Emotional investment</p>		<p>here and the teacher had left, so there was nothing Anyway I was given the job to look after that class. Nothing else. And it has evolved and developed. We have an ASD unit here now. 2 classes, so 12 pupils, and we have a huge uptake of children with SEN. So the bit of paperwork built up and up... It just evolved. Filling out a form about this person, and there was another one, you made application for hours. Who is going to meet them when they come in, who visits the schools and the paperwork. Who does RACE forms. I'm an accident in the school really (S5,p16)</p> <p>Being SENCO kind of came with the resource teacher... full resource teacher and so the coordinating bit of it just came with it...but the role has gotten bigger because when I first started in the role things like doing RACE, doing transition, doing lots of those additional things were done by my predecessor but kind of over the years they've just evolved into part of my role, I suppose, because I know the kids (S3,p23)</p> <p>IEPs</p> <p>I think, we've probably grown a bit with them. But also over the years, any big meetings I've had, I always say, I've always said look, these IEP's aren't mandatory. I said, you know, in many ways, I would have issues with them too in that I think people work very hard, people are very good to children, I actually have been very honest with people. They (DES) bring all these things in without the proper planning or structures, we're left making up our own plans.</p>
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<p>Emotionally challenging- especially when responding to needs of students with EBD/mental health concerns. (S2, p38)</p> <p>Pace of work</p> <p>Lack of support at policy level/system wide deficiencies/poor services</p> <p>Lack of CPD specific to SENCO (S1)-mentions</p> <p>SESS 3 day course as effective but in-house more effective</p> <p>Increase in student mental health issues (S1, p73).</p> <p>SENCO has busiest job in school (P2)</p>		<p>But I said the bottom line is that if we really want to support the children, this would be our practice. I said, if we're all part of this resource department, we need to work properly, we need to have this system. You know, nobody has everybody complained about doing it.....And you see, I actually am being honest with them. I do have an issue with it. It does annoy me. My whole career I've seen this with the Department (S1, p.35)</p> <p>We've given time for people to do it. We have explained to people that we have issues with it, and we have explained that it is not mandatory. we have explained that we want, we do it because we feel its best practice for the children, and its best practice for ourselves.. these children have very definite needs, (S1, p.36)</p> <p>Burden of responsibility: ..it was volume of work. It was the fact that no matter what I did I never got on top of it. I kind of resented the fact that I was working so hard, and I loved the job, but my satisfaction was completely diminished... I had a brief that was not sustainable. And when I spoke to that woman, it was interesting, she was neutral, I explained what I was doing, and she said to me, are you insane. That job will kill you. That's what she said, in plain English, and I was really cross then, but it was good to actually know that it wasn't my imagination. I actually, and I had, the outcomes were good. I had a very good relationship with parents, we were making a difference to kids, and I knew all that. In that sense I was positive about what I</p>
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<p>Dilemma-some SENCOs see the teaching as the most fulfilling aspect of the role, any reduction in teaching to try to manage workload not welcomed by some (S2). Disciplinarian versus approachable carer Including diverse range of abilities in mainstream classrooms (S5) Negative attitudes/perceptions of SEN teaching (S6)</p>		<p>was doing, but the actually doing of it was killing me.... And for a job that doesn't exist. What struck me, this is terrible to say, I don't care I'm going to say it anyway, in the middle of all that, let's say I did one day come in here and just drop from a stroke or something, right? I thought, what they'll actually say to me at the end of all this is why did you do it. That was a lightbulb moment for me. I thought, they won't actually care. They will say it's your fault. You did it. You had a choice. Even though I felt I didn't have a choice, I felt how could I walk away from those children. I did feel trapped. But I, at the same time, that moment of thinking, after all this, that's what they're going to say, was so painful, well that's just such an eye-opener [gets upset]. Impacted on my health, on my social interactions in the school. It impacted everything. And I'm not moaning. (S1, p.39)</p> <p>But at the end of my career, I felt it would be a job well done. And I'm coming to the end of my career now. I feel I gave it my best, and it was a job well done. And I did it. But really, with very little support, because in the end I had to make it up as I went along (S1, p.40). S1 workload-draws analogy of going to consultant and compares supports in placed there to lack of support in school (p.49)</p>
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		<p>We [parents and SENCO] would discuss that [student profile]. It would be a verbal agreement. But I never send it home. I'm afraid in case something doesn't happen, like if a teacher pulled out. I'd have to be updating it all the time. This is more of a working document for us (S4,p24)</p> <p>If you don't keep on top of it [paperwork], it could affect somebody's future (S4,p30)</p> <p>....there is no beginning point and no end to it, but.... one of the things I've found as well is that a lot of your informal networking and information gathering is done at lunch time in staffroom and I make it my business, so some days you don't want to be in the staffroom because, you know, bedlam may have gone onand you go just "oh, my head" or I could be down here doing something on the computer but you know, you have to have that time because to do it..... I actually love the work, but why do I have to work under pressure every minute of the day I'm here, and have for 20 years. When I go into the staffroom to have a cup of tea, responsibility, and she thinks it's attached to it. At any stage we could take thing off. (P5) going now and having a break. I work all my breaks (S1, p.37)</p>
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Phase 5-Data Reduction-Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme-generating clear definitions and names for each theme and subtheme		



Appendix J: Disseminating the Research

The table illustrates the full extent of research dissemination relevant to this study.

Dissemination Platform	Contribution
UCL IOE Doctoral School Summer Conference, London.	<u>Fitzgerald, J.</u> (June 2015). <i>Special Educational Needs Coordinators in Post-primary Schools in Ireland: An Exploration of the Role</i> (oral presentation).
British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Belfast.	<u>Fitzgerald, J.</u> (Sept. 2015). <i>Special Educational Needs Coordinators in Post-primary Schools in Ireland: An Exploration of the Role</i> (oral presentation).
Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (AMCSS), Limerick.	<u>Fitzgerald, J.</u> (Jan 2016). <i>The SENCO Role in Ireland: Current practice and future directions</i> (oral presentation).
Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Annual Meeting, St. Louis, Missouri, USA.	<u>Fitzgerald, J.</u> (April 2016). <i>Special Educational Needs Coordinators in Post-primary Schools in Ireland: Victims or agents of change?</i> (poster presentation).
JMB Special Education Conference, Dublin.	<u>Fitzgerald, J.</u> and Prendergast, T. (Sept. 2016). <i>From Policy to Practice: What does a school-wide approach to inclusive education look like?</i> (oral presentation).
Supporting the critical role of education in achieving social justice: Kerry Interagency Committee on Education Inclusion Conference, Tralee.	Daly, P. and <u>Fitzgerald, J.</u> (November 2016). <i>Special Educational Needs as a Vehicle for Social Justice</i> (oral presentation).

European Journal of Special Needs Education.	<u>Fitzgerald, J. and Radford, J.</u> (February 2017 online version). ‘The SENCO role in post-primary schools in Ireland: victims or agents of change?’
Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Annual Meeting, Boston, USA.	Fitzgerald, J. (April 2017). <i>Leadership in Inclusive Special Education: A Qualitative Exploration of the SENCO Role in Post-Primary Schools in Ireland</i> (poster presentation).
Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA) Annual Conference, Dublin 2017.	September 2017: Intended submission to orally present findings from doctoral research.
European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) 2018.	August 2018: Intended submission to orally present findings from doctoral research.
Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) Annual Conference 2018.	April 2018: Intended submission to orally present findings from doctoral research.
REACH: Journal of the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE).	Before April 2018: Intended article submission relating to doctoral research but with a focus on professional learning and the potential for developing professional learning communities for SENCOs.
An international journal relating to educational leadership.	Before June 2019: Intended article submission relating to doctoral research but with a focus on approaches to leadership in inclusive education.