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Adolescent Psychology***

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**Doctoral Thesis**

**Exploring the experiences and perceived impact on professional  
practice and wellbeing of SENCOs engaging with EP-led group  
supervision**

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Child, and Adolescent Psychology*

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## Student Declaration and Word Count

I, Megan von Spreckelsen, 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.

Approximate word count (exclusive of declaration, acknowledgements, abstract, impact statement, list of references and appendices): 39,700 words

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***Exploring the experiences and perceived impact on professional practice and wellbeing of SENCos engaging with EP-led group supervision***

**Abstract**

Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCos) in English schools are unique and stretched in the demands and strategic scope of their role to promote inclusion for individual children and young people (CYP) with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and across their school system. Professional supervision is a well-established practice across many vocational professions and seen as integral to the support and development of those in roles supporting vulnerable CYP, such as Educational Psychologists (EPs). Supervision opportunities remain lacking in schools despite increasing recognition of the relevance and need in this context. In light of ongoing changes to SEND legislation and increasing concern around supporting the wellbeing and retention of school staff, SENCos represent a key professional group which stands to gain from supervision opportunities. This study aims to capture and understand the experiences of school SENCos engaging with EP-led interprofessional group supervision. This case study research is conducted in the context of a local authority EP Service providing supervision to groups of SENCos across local primary and secondary school settings. Survey and interview data from this research align with the emerging literature to highlight the benefits of supervision to school staff in developing professional practice and wellbeing. SENCos particularly emphasized the restorative and protective impact they experienced from interprofessional supervision,

with the supervision group being identified as a key factor in SENCOs feeling less alone and supported to meet the challenging demands of their role. Broader systemic factors influencing the impact and experience of supervision are identified. This study demonstrates the value of interprofessional group supervision for SENCOs and exemplifies an important role for EPs in promoting professional wellbeing, understanding, and competence across school systems. The strengths and limitations of the present study are outlined, and the key findings discussed alongside implications for the systemic practice of EPs and school staff.

## **Impact statement**

The role of Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) in English schools is demanding and far-reaching. They hold significant responsibilities to coordinate provision for children and young people (CYP) with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and support inclusive practice across the school system. The current research used a mixed methodology to explore how interprofessional group supervision could support SENCos in their complex role. In the first phase of the study, an online survey was conducted to assess SENCos' experiences of EP-led supervision groups. The second phase used semi-structured interviews with a subset of participants to qualitatively explore the experiential aspects of supervision and perceived impact.

SENCo experiences reflect the broader picture of stress and burnout seen across the education sector. This study highlights the experiences of SENCos as 'firefighting' to meet the operational and strategic expectations of the role, alongside other responsibilities held in school. Survey and interview data corroborate existing research indicating the value of supervision opportunities to school staff. In line with previous literature around professional supervision, this study highlights the varied benefits that SENCos gained from supervision. For example, SENCos report restorative benefits to supervision such as reduced feelings of isolation. This builds on existing awareness of the role of supervision in offering restorative support to professionals working with vulnerable CYP.

Beyond restorative effects, this research highlights that supervision can help to develop protective factors around SENCos. This can promote the resilience and resources needed to navigate a challenging role and system. Critically, SENCos identify the

supervision group as playing a crucial role in achieving this outcome. Further to the reassurance and sharing of expertise among SENCOs in the group, the EP supervisor role was found to provide an augmented formative benefit through skilful facilitation of problem-solving discussions and the interprofessional lens offered by a knowledgeable other.

In line with emerging guidance and research around the implementation of supervision in schools, the current findings highlight a range of systemic factors which impact the experience of SENCOs engaging in supervision. These factors include the understanding and culture of supervision in the school system and supportive practice of senior leadership staff. Interview data emphasise the power of these factors as barriers or facilitators to SENCO experiences in shaping not only attendance but the systemic reach of benefits outside of the supervision group.

This thesis presents timely research into the use of EP-led interprofessional group supervision for SENCOs and highlights implications for practice in school systems and EP Services (EPSs). Findings highlight the need to recognise and prioritise supervision as a professional need for SENCOs as the epicentre of school inclusion. This research emphasizes the need for systemic support in schools to invest in professional opportunities to build staff wellbeing and development. The findings identify a key role for senior leadership staff in supporting a culture of shared understanding and prioritization of supervision opportunities across the school system. This study highlights a need for greater understanding in schools about the systemic role of EPs and recognizes the value of EPs in building staff wellbeing, skill, and capacity to support inclusive practice in schools. Greater education and clarity are therefore needed to



ensure a shared understanding of the EP role among school staff and effective commissioning of EP time. At an EPS level, this research suggests the need for a transparent and systemic approach to implementing interprofessional group supervision for SENCOs, with a shared commitment across senior leaders to protect supervision time as a professional need and investment.

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## **Glossary of Acronyms and Abbreviations**

CYP – Child or young person/children and young people

DfE – Department for Education

EHCP – Education, Health, and Care Plan

ELSA – Emotional Literacy Support Assistant

EP – Educational Psychologist

EPS – Educational Psychology Service

FSKW – Family Support Key Worker

HCPC – Health and Care Professions Council

LA – Local Authority

SEMH – Social, Emotional and Mental Health

SENCo – Special Educational Needs Coordinator

SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SLT – Senior Leadership Team

TA – Teaching Assistant

TEP – Trainee Educational Psychologist

# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **Overview**

There is not a formal tradition of supervision within education, despite it being a recognised practice that is built into most, if not all, other vocational professions supporting vulnerable CYP. Among educators, SENCOs operate at the forefront of inclusion and support for these CYP in their schools, holding a distinct role which continues to evolve and expand amidst ongoing legislative changes and wider school demands. For professionals looking to introduce supervision practice for staff in schools, there is limited research available to inform emerging professional guidance in this area. Specifically, there is a dearth of research around the implementation and impact of supervision for SENCOs, whose professional role spans significant and varied responsibilities and is central to inclusive practice across school systems.

The present research is being undertaken to explore the experiences and perceived impact of EP-facilitated professional group supervision among school SENCOs working across a large shire county. The nature of this case study enables individual experiences and views to be shared and analysed in context, while contributing towards an emerging research literature around the experience and impact of interprofessional supervision within education. To ensure transparency and understanding of the research rationale, aims, and chosen methodology, it is relevant to provide a summary of the researcher positionality, professional context, key concepts, and underpinning theoretical frameworks. Broader literature will then be introduced in the subsequent

chapter with critical review of relevant extant research studies in further detail to contextualise the specific research questions of interest.

## **Researcher background and positionality**

I was drawn to this area of research based on my own experience of professional supervision as a Trainee EP (TEP). My professional training has utilised supervision opportunities in individual and group contexts, with peers and more senior colleagues, across different EPS teams. Supervision has been vital to developing my professional confidence and competence - I have experienced first-hand how supervision can provide the space and support necessary to build understanding of professional roles and surrounding systems, reflective practice, and skill development as a practitioner.

This personal experience has enhanced a professional interest around the emerging EP practice of facilitating supervision within education. As limited time, capacity and funding can so often pose a barrier to preventative, systemic working, applying interprofessional supervision in a group context offers an exciting opportunity for EP work with school staff, spanning inclusion and wellbeing agendas alike. As commissioner of EP traded time and holding a complex and significant role for school inclusion, SENCos represent an important professional group of interest to me as a researcher and practitioner.

Experience working as a TEP on placement in an EPS serving a large Shire County has included opportunities to shadow and reflect on the use of interprofessional group supervision, facilitated by different EPs, to bring together SENCos from across the county. These observations and conversations with facilitating EPs developed the basis



for the present thesis research project and informed the subsequent research questions.

It is therefore in this local context of EP-facilitated SENCo group supervision that I sought to explore the impact of a group supervision space for SENCos and the role of EPs in facilitating this expansion of professional supervision across school systems.

## **Professional Context**

With the above local context in mind, a broader picture will now be presented to introduce the professional role of SENCo in more detail, as well as highlighting the current backdrop of mental health and wellbeing evident in schools.

### The SENCo role

The role of 'Special Educational Needs Coordinator' (SENCo) is unique within the school setting. It was formally established following the 1994 SEN Code of Practice to support and coordinate inclusion in mainstream schools. Since then, it has seen persistent challenges around establishing a clearly defined professional role and identity (A. Smith, 2020). The SENCo role aims to support inclusion and outcomes for children and young people (CYP) with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) at an operational and strategic level, spanning individual- and whole-school-focused work (SEND Code of Practice, Department for Education, 2015). The recent SEND review green paper (Department for Education, 2022b) recognises the breadth and importance of these responsibilities: '*SENCos play a critical role in sharing SEND expertise within*

*schools, providing specialist guidance to the wider school workforce, setting the strategic direction, and making day-to-day provisions to support children and young people with SEND, including those with EHCPs' (Education, Health and Care Plans).*

All mainstream schools are required to have a qualified teacher who is designated with the responsibility of SENCo (to coordinate provision for CYP with SEND). It is advised that the SENCo role should form part of the school's Senior Leadership Team (SLT), though this is not a statutory requirement (Department for Education, 2015). Indeed, recent data suggests a minority of SENCos are currently 'senior or strategic' leaders within school settings (Dobson, 2023). Among SENCos who do not sit within the SLT, supportive managers are highlighted as a key factor in SENCos being given more time, space and status with which to deliver their role (Cole, 2005).

It is common for SENCos to continue active teaching duties alongside the position, which can lead to the role becoming an extra responsibility. This is further compounded by SENCos often holding other broad roles in school like senior leadership positions (e.g., Assistant Head) and safeguarding responsibilities (Curran et al., 2020). As such, SENCos are routinely pulled away from SEND-focused activities to meet the wider needs of the school (Curran et al., 2018; M. Smith & Broomhead, 2019). The 2014 Code of Practice states that SENCos need 'sufficient time' to fulfil their role (Department for Education, 2015, 6.91) but there are no national guidelines for what 'sufficient' SENCo time allocation should look like.

SENCos are currently required to complete the National Award for SEN Co-ordination (NASENCo) within 3 years of taking the role. Since the recent publication of the Schools white paper (Department for Education, 2022a) and SEND green paper (Department for

Education, 2022b), further changes to SENCo work and training are proposed. These include plans to develop a new leadership level Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator National Professional Qualification (SENCo NPQ) to ensure teachers have *'the training they need to provide the right support to children.'*

Within the four broad areas of SEN defined in the SEND Code of Practice (p. 85, Department for Education, 2015), SENCos have a responsibility to coordinate provision to support CYPs' social, emotional and mental health (SEMH). Recent research conducted into SENCo experiences and views during the covid-19 pandemic highlighted that mental health and wellbeing was the top priority identified by SENCos across primary, secondary and special schools (Curran & Boddison, 2021). This study also indicated an expectation among SENCos that mental wellbeing would remain a focus of their work in the long-term. This perceived shift in focus towards SEMH raises a question around the capacity of schools and SENCos to adjust provision to meet the changing needs of the school community. Recent guidance on promoting CYPs' mental health and wellbeing emphasises a whole-school approach to supporting student SEMH, as well as recognising the importance of promoting staff wellbeing (Public Health England & Department for Education, 2021). This guidance also highlights the role of senior leadership to support a whole-school approach to wellbeing. This suggests a need for shared understanding and responsibility between SENCo and SLT colleagues, particularly for SENCos not positioned within SLT themselves, to ensure systemic provision to recognise and meet the SEMH needs of the school, including students and staff.

As a dynamic role with significant expectations and scope for impact across the school system, there has been longstanding recognition of the challenges surrounding the status, time and delivery of the SENCo role (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Maher & Vickerman, 2018). Despite this, there is little research into the experience of SENCos in managing these demands, particularly following SEND-reform like the 2015 Code of Practice (Curran & Boddison, 2021). Across the limited literature, the workload and administrative burden faced by SENCos (particularly around statutory processes) is reported as a barrier to developing inclusive practice and school culture, as well as limiting direct work with staff to improve provision (A. Smith, 2022; Tysoe et al., 2021).

Approximately one-third of SENCos report intention to remain in the role in five years' time (Curran & Boddison, 2021) which may indicate the specific demands placed on SENCos are contributing to lower job satisfaction and likelihood of remaining in the role. Indeed, workload continues to be cited as a key reason for those considering leaving the role (Curran et al., 2020). A link between longevity in the SENCo role and time allocated to fulfil SENCo responsibilities has also been suggested, with speculation that SENCo turnover may relate to a lack of understanding and prioritisation of the complex role within schools (M. Smith & Broomhead, 2019). Recent research illustrates that school contexts vary in their culture, which influences the climate of SENCo work, while further emphasising the key challenges experienced by SENCos around administrative workload and a lack of resources, protected time, and shared understanding of SEN and their role among colleagues (A. Smith, 2022). This is supported by recommendations based on National SENCo workforce survey data (Curran et al.,

2020) which advocate for providing SENCoS with more time, resources and support to improve understanding of the SENCo role among SLT and wider school staff.

Given the complexity of SENCo responsibilities and the background context of shifting SEND legislation and ongoing legacy of the pandemic experienced in schools, the case for supporting SENCoS with protected time to access supervision is more salient than ever before.

### Mental Health and wellbeing in schools

SENCo turnover also reflects a broader picture of stress-related burnout and retention difficulties across the teaching profession (Teacher Wellbeing Index, Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2021)

Existing research highlights the increased prevalence of mental health difficulties among educators compared to those working in other professions (Evans et al., 2018). A pilot study by the School Workforce in England (2020) of the Wellbeing in Secondary Education (WISE) project sampled 555 secondary school teachers and gathered data on measures of mental health and wellbeing. Their findings show teacher wellbeing scores (on the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale) were approximately four points below the average score for the general working population. Reports of experiencing moderate to severe levels of depression (on the Patient Health Questionnaire, PHQ-9) were also higher among teachers at 19.4% compared to 8-10% prevalence in the general population. These outcomes are consistently observed within the steadily declining retention rates among educators, even prior to the pandemic.

It is noted that: *'Many of the identified sources of teacher stress have remained consistent over time, though constantly changing sociological and environmental factors and educational practices and policies have brought other stressors into the frame'* (Travers, 2017, p. 1). This remains salient as the underlying stressors and significant concerns around wellbeing of school staff have only grown from the compounding impact of COVID-19, evident in the high levels of stress, negative mental health, low job satisfaction and sense of burn out among school staff (Pressley et al., 2021; Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2021).

In addition to the negative impact on teachers themselves, their own families and staff relationships, teacher stress has a considerable impact on students in terms of pupil outcomes and teacher-student relationships. The impact of teacher stress on CYP outcomes is consistently recognised in reviews of the literature (Travers, 2017; V. Wilson, 2002) and continues to be highlighted in research (Buggs, 2021). As mental health and wellbeing is increasingly an area of priority for SENCOs and schools (Curran & Boddison, 2021), it is important for school policy, practice and provision to promote staff as well as student wellbeing within a larger systemic picture. Recommendations for best practice in supporting staff wellbeing have strengthened calls for reflective practice and staff supervision to be implemented in schools (Abdinasir, 2019; Lawrence, 2020).

## The importance and role of professional supervision

Emerging professional guidance promotes the more formal introduction of supervision in schools as a means to address the key needs evident within the education sector (C. Carroll et al., 2020):

- professional development for staff supporting vulnerable CYP and promoting inclusive practice in schools
- to build further competence and confidence
- to help manage the complex demands of these roles
- improving staff mental health and wellbeing
- to build job satisfaction
- to improve retention of school staff

### Understanding supervision

There is no universally agreed definition of supervision to successfully operate across the many different contexts in which it is used, which is a challenge in itself. Supervision as a concept and practice is observed across a range of professions, particularly in vocational training and within applied psychology, social work, psychiatry, nursing, and therapeutic services). As such, terms like professional, clinical, counselling, and reflective supervision are commonly used. Scaife (2001) suggests that supervision happens when professionals *“make a formal arrangement to think with one another or others about their work with a view to providing the best possible service to clients and enhancing their own personal and professional development.”* (Scaife, 2001, p. 4).

Supervision can take different forms, including individual or in a group setting, and can

be conducted between individuals from the same or different professions (Dunsmuir et al., 2015). Peer supervision (either individual, i.e., one-to-one, or group) typically refers to colleagues at a similar level within the same profession. 'Interprofessional' supervision describes an arrangement where the supervisor is from a different (though often related) profession to the supervisee(s). The role of group dynamic and shared understanding of roles or professional context can therefore also shape the process and impact of supervision.

As is required by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), the statutory regulator for EPs and other health and care professionals, EPs must have an arrangement in place for regular supervision, throughout training and once qualified. Particularly given its use across vocational professions and during training, it is important to clarify that supervision is not a space in which the supervisor provides a teaching or therapy session. The centring of supervision around the individual's professional role and working environment distinguishes it from counselling or psychotherapy (M. Carroll, 2007). An example of supervision occurring within the Educational Psychology profession is one-to-one supervision between a trainee EP (TEP) and their placement supervisor, a qualified EP in their placement service. This protected time window for supervision would be led by the TEP's agenda, depending on their needs at that given time. For example, the time could be used for the TEP to reflect on their current placement work discussing individual cases to develop their psychological formulation or problem solve a concern around a case. It offers a space for the TEP to process the emotional impact of the work and for the supervisor to check-in with the TEP regarding their professional and personal wellbeing. Supervision could



also involve a space to support the TEP in developing task management skills, such as identifying priorities for the week. The supervision session is focused on the TEP's development of knowledge, competence and confidence, in line with their goals. This allows the TEP to explore the relational aspects of their professional role working across different contexts, for example with teachers, parents and other professionals.

The above example and alternative cases of 'supervision' differ from other professional development activities like performance or line management, mentoring or coaching (C. Carroll et al., 2020; Clark et al., 2006). This distinction is important as experienced practitioners may hold the role of line manager, supervisor, mentor or coach at different times in their career, though there are conceptual boundaries between these roles. For clarity, line management practices are commonplace across professions, with line managers typically holding direct managerial responsibilities for individual professionals to ensure delivery of their role. This helps support broader organisation policy objectives, with a line manager providing a link between individual workers and the strategic aims of an organisation (Townsend & Dundon, 2015). Line management typically reflects an organisational hierarchy that positions line managers above the individuals they manage, so could be described as operating a 'vertical' power dynamic. Mentoring refers to support offered to a professional learner (mentee) through a significant career transition, for example in preparation for and during a job promotion in which the mentee will take on new responsibilities (C. Carroll et al., 2020). Mentoring is led by experienced colleagues with knowledge of what the role requires who can mediate access to a range of increasingly self-directed learning opportunities (and hence can also operate a somewhat 'vertical' power dynamic.) Coaching describes

when a professional learner (e.g., a trainee) identifies a specific aspect of their practice that they wish to develop. In contrast to mentoring and line management, coaching can offer a more 'horizontal' power dynamic (or certainly more agency for the individual), as the professional learner would typically choose their coach themselves, specifically for their knowledge and expertise relevant to the learner's particular goals.

In contrast to coaching, those engaging in supervision do not necessarily have one specific professional goal in mind to focus on and supervisees do not typically select their own supervisors as part of the contracting process. The concept and practice of supervision (whether 'reflective', 'professional', or 'clinical' etc.) does not necessarily operate a vertical power dynamic, as supervision can be conducted more 'horizontally' between peers with an expectation of mutual gain. On the other hand, supervision dyads between two individuals with different levels of seniority and expertise can emulate a line management hierarchy, though with a focus on the professional development needs of the supervisee rather than tasks required by the organisation.

In the case of a TEP, their placement supervisor may simultaneously hold a line management role in which they hold responsibility for the TEP's work, for example reviewing reports for quality assurance. This example of adjacent roles and practices around supervision is not uncommon and highlights the importance (and challenge) of differentiating professional supervision from line management that is recognised in the research literature (Kadushin, 1976). In professional contexts operating a classical management conceptualisation of 'supervision,' the terminology and practice can be interpreted as managerial oversight and surveillance surrounding staff productivity and progress (Peach & Horner, 2007) aligning more with line management aims. Hence, it is

important to clarify the conceptualisation of 'supervision' operating in this research study and professional context as not a tool for performance management or assessment of practice, mentoring or coaching.

To avoid the blurring of line management agendas and supervision interactions, it is therefore important to allocate protected time for supervision (Ayres et al., 2015) and ensure a shared understanding of the purpose and aims of supervision in each specific context. Having explained above how supervision differs from other seemingly similar professional practices, i.e., clarifying what supervision is *not*, it is still relevant to recognise the challenge of defining what supervision *is*, even within one context, as it remains a term and practice that is subject to social construction by individuals with differing experiences and understanding of language. In the current research context, individual SENCOs may therefore hold perceptions of supervision that reflect different emphases or processes based on their experience. However, the broad concept and aim of supervision in this context (operating among the EPS and supervisors of the group) aligns with Scaife's (2001) definition, which presents supervision as offering a confidential space in which professionals can engage in a psychological process of reflection designed to support them in their personal and professional development when considering their work and responses to it (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010). The distinct features of supervision, as outlined in Helen and Douglas House Clinical Supervision Toolkit (McTaggart et al., 2014), highlight the importance of supervisees feeling able to listen and be heard within an affirmative and supportive process. It is a self-directed professional development and learning opportunity for supervisees. This

supports personal accountability and provides a safe space to question and challenge, often with use of a structured framework to facilitate reflection.

This concept and practice of supervision is valued and well established in other social and healthcare sectors, and it has long been suggested that the education sector could benefit from its implementation (Steel, 2001). An evident next step is to consider where supervision could be implemented in a school context. Given limited time and funding across schools typically presents a barrier to allocation of professional resources, it is relevant to consider professional roles with systemic reach across a school, like SENCos, for whom supervision could have a valuable impact.

#### Professional development to support inclusive practice

UK government data shows a trend of rising numbers of CYP with identified SEN in school (Department for Education, 2022c): figures from the 2021-22 academic year show 4% of pupils are supported by an EHCP and a further 12.6% of the school population are on the SEN register, which continues a trend of increasing numbers since 2016. The professional demands on SENCos are significant considering the increasing level of SEN in schools, alongside responsibilities to other CYP groups requiring additional support, for example pupils with English as an additional language (Tysoe et al., 2021) and care-experienced children (Curran & Boddison, 2021). The macrosystemic climate of austerity and funding cuts to services supporting vulnerable families has placed a greater burden on school staff, SENCos especially, with expectations to support CYP at the centre of complex social issues like domestic violence and substance addiction (C. Carroll et al., 2020). For other professionals

supporting these groups, like social care workers, supervision is a well-established process and seen as central to ensure effective professional development and delivery of quality practice to best support vulnerable CYP and their families (Stanley, 2018).

Despite expectations on SENCOs to respond to the often-challenging needs presented by these same CYP in school and identify the relevant adjacent professional services, SENCOs do not typically receive supervision opportunities to manage these demands (C. Carroll et al., 2020). This highlights a concerning gap in the availability of professional support in schools to reflect, prioritise and best respond to demands.

Although departmental support and line management may be available for teaching staff, this does not encapsulate the necessary opportunities for SENCOs to direct and own their professional learning, to develop greater understanding of SEND and to consider broader systemic factors around real-world challenges. As the SENCO role is typically held by one individual in school, which can lead to feelings of isolation (Curran & Boddison, 2021), there is also greater need for wider professional understanding and recognition in schools of the SENCO role and its specific challenges.

Supervision can offer a framework to discuss and solve problems arising for SENCOs in their work, with space to question and challenge thinking around individual cases and systems to best serve the SENCO's professional needs. It can also protect time within working hours to reflect on the longer-term strategic aspect of the role which is necessary for more systemic policy and practice around inclusion.

## Supporting school staff wellbeing

The supervisory relationship in other professions is recognised as an important way to develop resilience in practitioners (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016) protect against burnout (Knudsen et al., 2008) and can in fact enhance professional wellbeing (Howard, 2008).

Existing research in the area of teacher wellbeing has highlighted individuals feeling under-supported and that there is insufficient training received to cope with the demands of the role which have personal impact (Roth et al., 2008). This links to research conducted with SEND teachers across the United States which highlighted the role of leadership in job satisfaction of SEND staff - to feeling valued, affirmed and given meaningful opportunities for professional development (Robinson et al., 2019). This research found a significant relationship between job satisfaction and burnout among educators. For SENCOs who hold a complex role and often share other responsibilities in school, the experience of feeling valued, understood and supported professionally is likely even more salient.

In particular, given SENCO experiences of isolation in school (Curran & Boddison, 2021), opportunities for sharing of concerns and emotions with other professionals presents an opportunity for containment (Bion, 1962). It is argued that, particularly in the context of stretched school staff, a space for containment and processing of emotions is key in supporting 'reflective' rather than 'reactive' practice (Jackson, 2002).

As is highlighted in the titular quote of Curran and Boddison's research around understanding the complexity of the current SENCO role: *'It's the best job in the world,*

*but one of the hardest, loneliest, most misunderstood roles in a school'* (Curran & Boddison, 2021). This illustrates the challenging professional context to current SENCo work and highlights the need for supervision as a means to start addressing many of these issues facing SENCos in the current climate.

## **Rationale for the present research**

Time and resourcing for supervision is protected in professions like Educational Psychology and extends beyond early career training, highlighting the central role of supervision in 'continued professional development' (CPD). Supervision guidance for EPs also recognises concerns that supervision is especially needed during periods of transition and limited resourcing but can be viewed as a luxury to be minimised, putting practitioners and service-users at risk (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010). It is therefore also relevant to identify key factors influencing the implementation and maintenance of effective supervision practice to support positive outcomes.

The research literature surrounding use of supervision in UK schools is limited, as is data on SENCo experiences and the potential impact of professional supervision for this unique, complex role on the forefront of school inclusion. Findings from recent small-scale studies highlight the positives of supervision for SENCos and school staff (Reid & Soan, 2019; Willis & Baines, 2018) and have informed emerging guidance around supervision for SENCos and school leaders (C. Carroll et al., 2020). This guidance proposes a definition of supervision in this context as *'a structured process that supports the development of knowledge, competence and confidence in the part of the*

*supervisee to address provision for pupils with SEND in a setting'* (C. Carroll et al., 2020). Further research is needed in this space to gain insight into SENCo experiences of this practice and its impact, with identification of relevant factors that influence outcomes. Exploring the potential impact of group supervision for SENCos is particularly relevant in the current context of legislative reform, limited resources and often insular working patterns following the pandemic. This forms the rationale for the present research which aims to explore the experiences of SENCos engaging with interprofessional group supervision.

When calling on researchers to study group supervision, it has been suggested that exploratory rather than confirmatory initial research can seek to understand the foundational practices, structures and learning influences of group supervision, that could inform more in-depth research questions in future (Prieto, 1996). The specific exploratory aims of the present research are to understand the impact of interprofessional group supervision on SENCos' professional practice and wellbeing. The researcher also seeks to identify systemic barriers and facilitators which impact SENCos' experience of supervision, with a view to informing future provision of supervision opportunities and further research in this context.

## **Relevance to Educational Psychologists**

The experience and impact of group supervision for school SENCos is highly relevant to the educational psychology profession. EPs have extensive experience of varied supervision arrangements from their own training and continued professional



development. EPs also receive specific training to develop a robust understanding of relevant psychological theories and frameworks which underpin supervisory practice. EPs hold expertise and skill relevant to facilitating effective interpersonal communication and problem-solving as is required in much of the consultation work with families and professionals. In particular, understanding of psychodynamic principles and social identity relevant to group contexts make EPs well placed to facilitate group supervision in which their differing professional perspective and psychological knowledge can support effective collaboration among supervisees.

In the role of supervisor amongst a group of SENCOs, EPs also bring a thorough understanding of SEN, school systems, and the challenging SENCO role, through whom EP work in schools is commissioned. EPs' contextual understanding of SENCO work and its demands offers relevant insight with which SENCOs can feel understood, while EPs operate outside of the school system in which SENCOs may feel stuck. As such, EPs are well placed in the role of supervisor to provide a different professional perspective and unique skills in facilitating group problem-solving to support SENCOs in developing their own thinking and practice with a shared goal to support vulnerable CYP.

Given their specific skill set and professional positioning relative to schools, it is relevant to explore the impact of interprofessional supervision facilitated by EPs where supervision opportunities for school staff may otherwise be limited to those within a school setting, conducted by colleagues who work within the same microsystem. Supervision guidance for EPs published over a decade ago (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010) recognised rising demand for EPs to provide supervision for those from other

professional backgrounds, such as school staff. Considering this continued interest in EP supervision outside of the profession, the present study offers research insight into the experience and impact of interprofessional group supervision currently provided by EPs in a LA EPS context.

In addition to their involvement to improve outcomes for individual CYP with SEND, EPs play a key role in promoting mental health and wellbeing at a systemic level across school communities (Greig et al., 2019; Roffey et al., 2016). In the context of the pandemic recovery and recent shift towards promoting mental health in schools, it is timely to explore how interprofessional supervision could be a tool to build resilience and optimise professional capacity in school pastoral provision. Sharing findings to highlight the perceptions of supervisees around the impact of supervision therefore has implications for how EP time could be utilised in schools. Particularly considering limited funding and resources in schools, it is valuable to offer evidence of how EP time can be used, with examples of more systemic investment (i.e., supporting SENCOs through group supervision) presenting an alternative or augmentation to costly individual child-directed case work. This study therefore offers timely investigation of the impact of interprofessional group supervision on school SENCOs' practice, wellbeing, and interactions with their wider school system, and the role of EPs as supervisor in this context.

## **Theoretical underpinnings**

While there are different theoretical frameworks and models with which supervision might be structured in practice, the process of supervision and interactions between supervisory participants align with a systemic lens and social constructionist positioning.

### Social constructionism

The terms 'social constructionism' and 'social constructivism' sometimes appear to be used interchangeably in the literature, despite a critical debate on nuanced differences in their meaning and theoretical origins (Burr, 2003). For the purposes of this thesis, the term 'social constructionism' is used, based on the conceptualisation put forward by Burr (2003) which underpins the foundational constructs and positioning of this research, as outlined below.

Social constructionism recognises individuals as part of a wider system of social interactions and processes through which language is used to co-construct reality and shared understanding (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2001). This foundational position underpins the conceptualisation of supervision as providing a collaborative, discursive space for the co-construction of shared understanding, while respecting individual contributions and different perspectives (Philp et al., 2007).

The considerable therapeutic and clinical history and variations in conceptualisation of supervisory relationships and process highlights a potential challenge for evaluative research. Therefore, the present exploratory research recognises the broad term of 'interprofessional group supervision' as one that is socially constructed and open to different interpretations and applications across contexts. Indeed, the positioning and

perceived expertise of the supervisor might reasonably have a bearing on the process and the foundational literature utilises terms like 'consultation' (Hanko, 1999) to reflect a dynamic of equal expertise and professional contribution, whereas the researcher recognises this term can also be perceived to hold medicalised connotations of a more prescriptive 'expert' model. In exploring such individual constructions and the experiential reflections of SENCos engaging in interprofessional group supervision, this research is seated well within the theoretical framework and epistemological foundation of social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2001).

A social constructionist framework recognises the formative role of social context as people construct norms and belief systems through interpretation of their lived experience, identity and language. It emphasises the significance of human interaction ('social') to the development (or 'construction') of knowledge. This theory of the 'sociology of knowledge' was proposed by Berger & Luckmann (1966) and developed by key figures like Burr, who emphasised the power of language and social discourse as a tool in the process of constructing knowledge:

*A discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events ... surrounding any one object, event, person etc there may be a variety of different discourses, each with a different story to tell about the object in question, a different way of representing it to the world. (Burr, 2003)*

Social constructionism sits opposite a positivist stance associated with the natural sciences which holds that objective knowledge can be discovered empirically. In the context of EP work, social constructionism offers a theoretical foundation to the

psychological processes of supervision and consultation in which the EP facilitates the naming and exploration of people's experiences and understanding of language to ensure a grounding for effective collaboration. Thus, a social constructionist framework would include exploration of individual conceptualisations of the term 'supervision' as part of the early contracting process among the group to ensure shared understanding of the process and co-construct meaningful aims with and for the members of the group.

The present case study context provides a unique environment to gather perspectives of individuals in the same professional role (SENCo) in different school settings collaborating within a supervision group. Variations in inter-personal group dynamic, prior experience of supervision or consultation and engagement with different supervision processes and meeting structures will all serve to inform the perceptions of group supervision and knowledge constructed through collaborative reflection and discourse. Hawkins and Shohet (2006) recognise the influence of an individual's style of work as a practitioner on the model and delivery of supervision (Hawkins & Shohet, 2006). They highlight the need for supervisor and supervisee(s) to share sufficient language and beliefs in common to be able to collaboratively learn and reflect effectively. This is relevant considering the interprofessional dynamic between EP supervisor and SENCo supervisees, though will be supported by the EP's professional skill and recognition of the common legislative frameworks and collaborative work in schools to support CYP with SEN between the respective professional roles.

The positioning of the EP supervisor within the group and expectations of relative expertise or instruction to the group reiterate the role of perceived power dynamics and intersectional identities in the group which may be unspoken or invisible, as outlined in

Burnham's 'Social Graces' (Burnham, 2012). As well as supporting the normative, formative, and restorative functions of supervision, EP supervisors must also reflect on their perceived identity and dynamic role within that group, which may include SENCOs with which the EP works day-to-day in school and has a dyadic relationship. This highlights the importance of transparency and allowing space for learning about each individual to facilitate an equal group dynamic in which supervisees can feel balanced respect, containment and support.

The social constructionist underpinning to the present research has informed the methodological approach to engage in piloting and member-checking processes to ensure shared understanding of data collection measures. This allows for informed interpretation of findings which relate to group processes and a particular social and professional context.

### Bioecological systems theory

In line with social constructionist positioning, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory provides a systemic theoretical framework through which this research is conceptualized (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005). Bronfenbrenner's recent iteration of the model highlights a systemic lens which recognises the role of Process, Person, Context, and Time (PPCT) across an individual's environment and experience (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This systemic model aligns well with social constructionism to explore how an individual develops and co-constructs meaning and experience through interaction with their surrounding systems.

Bronfenbrenner's model presents four primary systems making up the ecosystem or broader environment around an individual, each with scope to impact their experiences: the Microsystem; the Mesosystem; the Exosystem; and the Macrosystem. The microsystem is the immediate system surrounding an individual with direct impact on their experience.

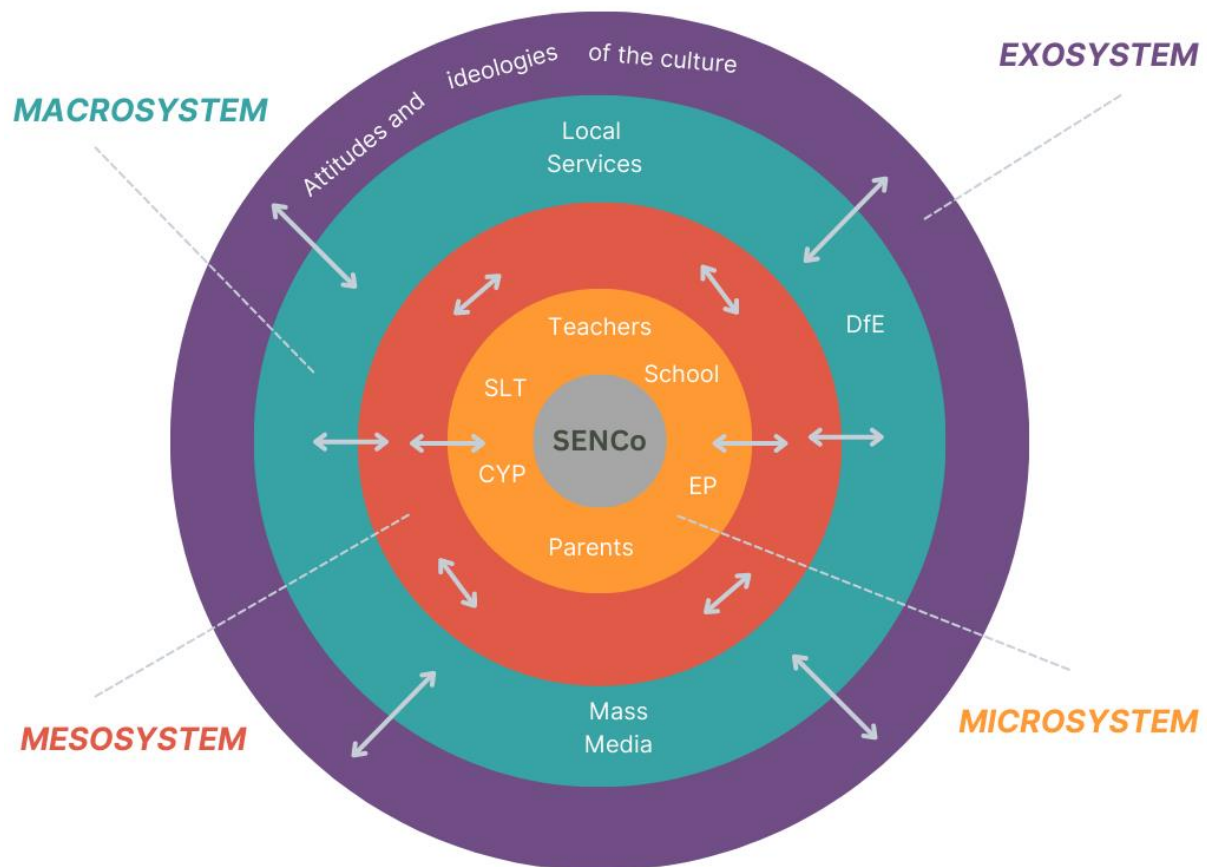
Bronfenbrenner's original model is child-centred with the ecosystem constructed around the individual CYP. However, in the conceptualisation and context of the present research, the SENCo is centred as the individual around which the wider ecosystem is structured. SENCos are by no means an auxiliary part of the system but represent the epicentre of school inclusion and a key agent of change regarding systemic practice within schools. An individual CYP attending school represents one of many recipients of the inclusive practice and provision in place, while the SENCo at that school is the individual holding the inclusion agenda and responsible for its implementation in practice. As introduced earlier in this chapter, existing policy recommendations around wellbeing have also emphasised the importance of a systemic lens, whole-school support and attention to staff experiences (Public Health England & Department for Education, 2021) rather than solely focusing at the level of individual pupils. The SENCo voice in particular seems under-represented within the existing research literature around school staff wellbeing, retention and practice in the context of high SEN among pupils. In response to this identified gap and to inform future research and policy discussions, this research aims to seek and prioritise the perspective of SENCos. Therefore, this study is not focused on exploring pupil experiences nor does the present research design measure direct impact of SENCo group supervision experiences on

individual CYP. This research does consider the impact of SENCo supervision experiences on their work with service-users, though this is explored from the SENCo perspective.

The present adaptation and application of Bronfenbrenner’s model around the SENCo therefore presents the microsystem as referring to the SENCo’s school setting, which includes colleagues, pupils and parents (see Figure 1 below.)

**Figure 1**

*Adapted PPCT model from Bronfenbrenner (2005)*



The mesosystem represents the interactions between different aspects of the microsystem. In the case of SENCos, the mesosystem would include interactions with



outside professionals like EPs, interactions between parents and school staff etc. The exosystem extends from the mesosystem and refers to the overarching social systems in which an individual operates but does not experience direct interaction, i.e., the surrounding system which can have vicarious influence on the lived experience of individuals. For example, changes to priorities or guidance from the Department of Education will have an impact on the operational experience within school microsystems, with SENCos and staff impacted by changing expectations or delivery of their roles.

The macrosystem describes the broader cultural context in which an individual is living, for example the political, economic, and legal systems and ideologies in play. An example of macrosystemic significance to this research would be the political context and ideology underpinning everyday life. For example, if the accepted political process were to change such that unelected officials could introduce law and policy changes without democratic consultation or review, this would fundamentally change the culture at a national level, with further impact across all other layers of the ecosystem, i.e., a 'trickle-down' impact to local systems, school settings and individuals.

A fifth system has been more recently added, the chronosystem, which refers to the temporal positioning of an individual and highlights the role of time in the experience and interaction of systems surrounding an individual. For example, in the context of global covid-19 pandemic recovery, an upcoming general election in the UK and ongoing legislative review around SEND, the experiences of SENCos captured in current exploratory research will likely vary compared to those captured during a different time, for example before the 2015 SEN Code of Practice. This also applies with

regard to an individual person's timeline, for example if a SENCo were to engage in supervision for the first time while qualifying and beginning the role, compared to a later career stage and having been a SENCo for decades. This added interpretative layer of time (encompassing hours and days as well as years and decades) recognises individual development and experience as dynamic, much like the theoretical model itself which has evolved over time. More recent iterations (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and review of critical discourse surrounding its application (Tudge et al., 2009) highlights the recognition of biological factors and personal characteristics as important to an individual's experience, with a role in their own development. The present research aims to explore the experiences and perspectives of SENCos engaging in interprofessional supervision groups, representing mesosystemic interactions with a supervising EP and SENCo colleagues, and scope for impact within the school microsystem in particular. The systemic ecological lens through which this research is conceptualised also offers broader reflection on the wider systemic levels of influence suggested from this case study context.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Overview**

This chapter sets the context to the present research with more in-depth exploration of the underlying concepts and dynamics relevant to supervision, as well as clarifying terminology and scope for a systematic search of relevant literature for review. Critical reflections on the current research findings and gaps evident in the literature will be outlined with a view to setting out the present research questions and methodological challenges this study aims to address.

### **Key concepts and terminology**

There are many different models of supervision with which it can be conceptualised and applied in different contexts. The present research is not focused on evaluating different models and associated structures of supervision but seeks to develop an understanding of the impact of interprofessional group supervision and how it is experienced by SENCOs.

#### **The function and impact of supervision**

Given this emphasis on exploring impact, Proctor's functional interaction model of supervision is relevant in presenting three core functions of supervision (Proctor, 2008). This provides a means to conceptualise the scope and domains of the possible impact of supervision, which could in turn be viewed through a systemic lens to explore these

functions beyond the individual supervisee. The functional model presents supervision as a process and tool that has formative, restorative, and normative functions (Hawkins & Shohet, 2006; Proctor, 2008).

### *Formative*

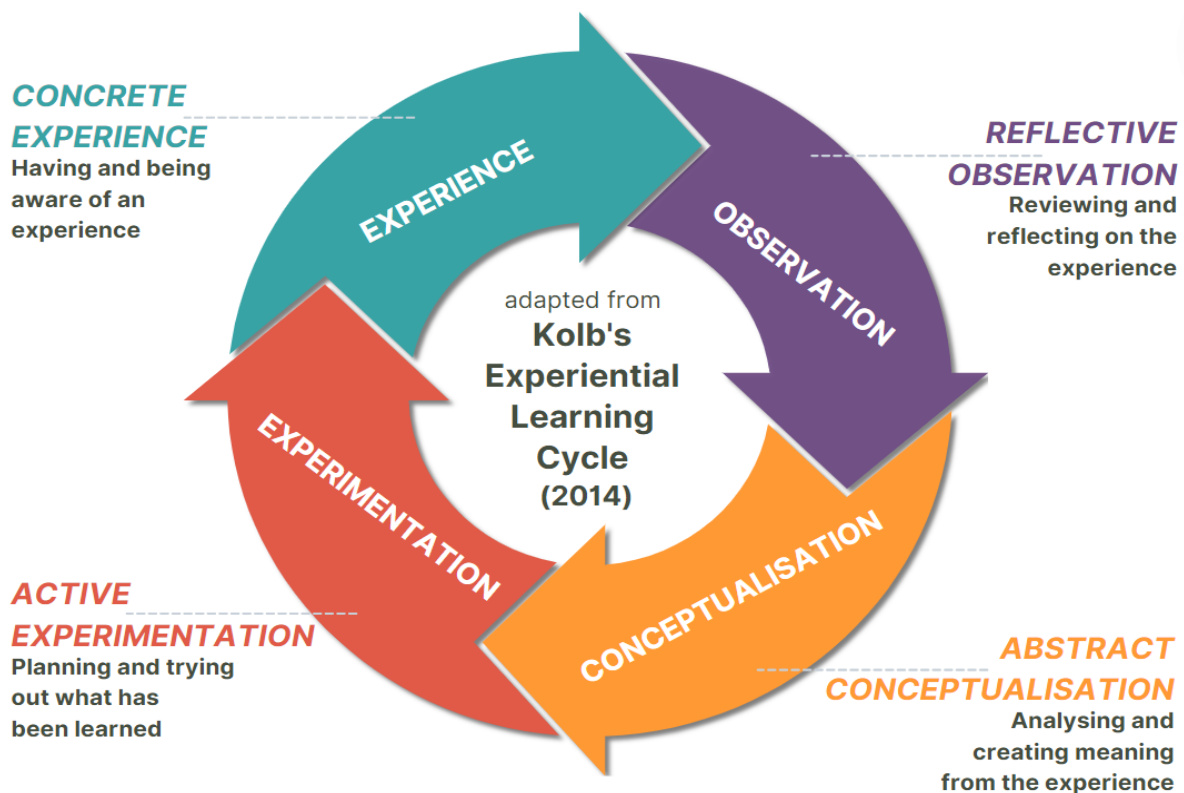
The 'formative' function of supervision serves to promote the supervisee's professional education, development in thinking and, in turn, quality of practice. The formative aspect of supervision focuses on the knowledge and skills developed through supervision as well as building self-reflection to develop further professional awareness. This view of supervision as a tool for supporting ongoing professional reflection aligns with Kolb's adult learning model (Kolb, 2014) which builds on the foundational work of figures like Piaget and Vygotsky. Kolb's theory on the process through which adults acquire and embed new knowledge is represented by a four-stage experiential learning cycle from concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (see Figure 2 below.)

This fits well within a process of interprofessional supervision in which SENCos experience situations in their working environment which they bring with them into the supervision group. Facilitation by the supervising EP and curiosity from other SENCos can support deeper reflection on the experience, with guiding questions like 'what worked well?' and 'what do you think prompted the situation?' to scaffold this stage of development in thinking. Further to this, questions to conceptualise alternative strategies ('How could I have responded differently?' or 'What could be improved?') and sharing of perspectives from other group members can serve to better understanding and present new ideas. These reflections and newly acquired theoretical knowledge can

then be put into practice when SENCOs return to their working environment between group meetings and have the opportunity to implement alternative strategies and experiment to find ways that work better, which in turn forms new concrete experiences.

## Figure 2

*Visual adaptation of Kolb's model of adult learning*



This reflective cycle maps onto the broad procedural stages outlined in Farouk's (2004) process consultation approach (Farouk, 2004).

Although this cycle of learning can occur continuously, irrespective of engagement with supervision, the researcher recognises the power of supervision to encourage points of reflection and formulation of new approaches, through direct personal experience throughout professional training. The tendency otherwise can easily be to continue

practice under the burden of capacity limitations without the same space for learning and change. When exploring the perceived impact of group supervision on SENCo practice and well-being, the theoretical process of experiential learning and cycle of reflection presents a mechanism with which learners might identify and can recognise explicit prompts of, for example, the reflection stage through questions asked in supervision that may otherwise not be considered so actively.

In support of professional development, supervision can adopt a goal-oriented position (Cooper & McLeod, 2011) to remain purposeful during supervision interactions and activities. This can be reflected in the process of supervision and particular framework adopted by the supervisee(s), to prompt the presenting supervisee to identify their goal when putting a case or topic forward for discussion. For example, the supervisee may seek to better understand the systemic factors impacting a case, gain advice as to what to do in a given situation or to learn more about a newly identified topic of relevance to the role.

### *Restorative*

The 'restorative' domain of supervision refers to the supportive function of supervision around the supervisee's wellbeing. Supervision can provide a space for supervisees to recognise and process the emotional impact of their work in a supportive environment, which relates to managing stress and reducing the risk of burn out.

Supervision provides opportunities for school staff to experience protected working time to reflect in a safe, non-judgemental space and experience psychological containment when discussing challenging and potentially emotionally burdensome case work. Group

supervision offers an opportunity for professional connection with others who might share similar experiences, creating ground for empathy and a sense of belonging. Considering recognition of the SENCo role as isolating (Curran & Boddison, 2021), there is scope for group SENCo supervision to provide individual professionals with an opportunity to experience belonging as part of a collective group and to gain reassurance from others facing similar challenges in their work. Research by Haggard, Robert, and Rose (2011) presents the construct of co-rumination (excessive discussion of problems with peers) which they suggest can have a negative effect, as dwelling on the problem can lead to depression (Haggard et al., 2011). Equally, they identify scope for positive effects too on sense of closeness with others and increased job satisfaction. Here, the supervisor has a role in facilitating empathetic interactions to show shared experience and closeness, while monitoring group discussion and direction of problem-based language to mitigate the chance that initial offloading becomes dwelling. There is increasing recognition of the supervisor role more broadly in monitoring and promoting supervisee wellbeing as an important component of facilitating 'best practice' among practitioners (Hewson & Carroll, 2016).

### *Normative*

The 'normative' function of supervision relates to support with administrative and managerial aspects of a supervisee's practice. To avoid risk of blurring line management and supervision, it is relevant to clarify how the normative function of supervision differs from other professional management processes. The normative domain of supervision refers to supporting accountability for supervisees in their practice, awareness of ethical and legal considerations, and compliance with relevant

procedures and professional standards for the well-being of service-users. For example, with regard to SENCo work, this might include quality assurance of inclusive practice and delivery of statutory duties in schools, supporting SENCos in delivering best outcomes for CYP with SEN, in line with the stipulations of the SEN Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2015) and Equality Act (UK Government, 2010).

### *Developing professional identity*

Further to Proctor's three core functions, Scaife (2001) suggests additional features of supervision which offer possible impact, which is especially salient in the training context or, in this case, for SENCos new to the role. These features include development of professional identity for the supervisee and communication of the norms and standards of the profession, which in the case of a new SENCo may represent more 'formative' output as new learning rather than 'normative' quality assurance.

### The process and dynamic of supervision

There is an emphasis on hierarchical ('master-apprentice') supervisory dyads (one supervisor and one supervisee) across the definitions and models in the literature (Wilmot, 2022), which operates as the standard in many professional contexts.

However, the process of supervision can be applied in various different contexts and participant combinations, within and across professions.

Based on relevance to the present research aims, setting and professional context, this study focuses on supervision conducted in groups and between a supervisor and supervisees from different professions.



### *Group supervision*

In contrast to the typical supervisor-supervisee dyad present in individual supervision, group supervision consists of “the regular meeting of a group of supervisees with a designated supervisor... [in which] supervisees are aided in achieving [their] goals by the supervisor(s) and by their feedback from and interactions with each other” (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009, p. 244). Though a review of group supervision research recognises variation in the size, composition and models of supervision groups in practice (Mastoras & Andrews, 2011).

Analysis from research comparing individual with small and large group supervision arrangements suggest all three supervision formats can support similar progress in practitioner development outcomes but found that supervisee participants expressed a preference for individual feedback (Ray & Altekruise, 2000). On a pragmatic level however, the confidential and complex nature of any supervision context presents a challenge to tangibly measuring impact (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989) in any arrangement.

Compared to supervision dyads, group supervision offers an additional layer of facilitated group dynamics to the social construction of ideas and understanding.

Beyond formative development, group supervision offers an opportunity for collective identity within an environment where supervisees may experience emotional containment within their relationships with other supervision group members (Bion, 1962). It is argued though that the group lens, dynamic and varied professional experience within a supervision group provides further reflective insight: “*an aid to seeing practice in a diversity of ways – offering a tower with many windows.*” (Proctor & Inskipp, 2001, p. 99). Hawkins & Shohet (2006) also propose that supervision delivered

in a group context provides a space for augmented emotional containment and support amongst professionals experiencing similar challenges, important for a sense of recognition and belonging.

Similarly, in reference to the formative function of supervision, group sharing of information and collaborative problem solving enables supervisees to engage in social learning (Wilmot, 2022). Hence, group supervision enables 'conceptual change in people's lives [due to it being] closer to the natural way in which people change and grow' (Abels, 1977, p. 176). Group supervision also allows for supervisees to recognise and call on the expertise in the group for 'what works', empowering supervisees to identify solutions themselves rather than seek an instructional dynamic with the supervisor.

Group supervision also represents a different level of opportunity for individual expression and verbal communication of thinking compared to supervision conducted one-to-one. Proctor suggests that 'misused and wasted potential in a group can create boredom, anxiety and purposelessness' (Proctor, 2008, p. 19) if individuals are not able to experience a sense of equal or appropriate contribution within group discussions. Hanley (2017) also highlights the pragmatic and financial challenges associated with group supervision (Hanley, 2017). The factors seen to influence how 'fruitful', i.e., impactful, the sessions are for supervisees, were identified as largely determined within the group, including development of a clear working agreement and maintenance of adequate boundaries. These potential barriers highlight the importance of skill on the part of the supervisor, whose role is to monitor and facilitate sufficient contributions across all supervisees in the group (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012). Despite the additional

nuance and potential challenges of group supervision, there is a perception that the advantages typically outweigh the difficulties (de Haan, 2012; Proctor, 2008).

On a pragmatic level with capacity and funding limitations in mind, group supervision also represents an opportunity for efficient application of psychological, supervisory processes in school systems (with one EP supervising multiple SENCos). This is particularly relevant in the current climate of EPs looking to maximise systemic work and impact with limited resources.

### *Interprofessional supervision*

Interprofessional supervision occurs between a supervisor and supervisee(s) who do not share the same professional training or occupation. Townend clarified this is when *‘two or more [practitioners] meeting from different professional groups to achieve a common goal of protecting the welfare of the client,’* elaborating that, much like individual supervision, *‘this protection is achieved through a process that enables increased knowledge, increased skill, appropriate attitude and values... to maintain clinical and professional competence’* (Townend, 2005, p. 586).

The benefits of interprofessional supervision reported within the research literature include supervisees developing deeper level of skill, critical thinking and identifying opportunities for bringing more creativity into practice (Hutchings et al., 2014; Townend, 2005). Interprofessional supervision is suggested as a means to support professionals to challenge assumptions of practice (Hutchings et al., 2014) and protect against professional complacency (Townend, 2005). In particular the introduction of a different professional perspective from someone outside of the supervisee’s system is valued

and contributes towards greater understanding of wider professional views and different roles and responsibilities across multidisciplinary groups (Hutchings et al., 2014; Townend, 2005).

Hanko (1999) highlights the optimal position of EPs to undertake the role of supervisor to a group of school staff, given their involvement across all levels of a school system or more broadly within a local authority service (Hanko, 1999). The SENCo in particular is a typical point of contact and contracting for EP work in schools, both across individual case work and more systemic involvement, such as identifying training needs among staff and support with promoting school-wide mental health. EPs can also utilise curious enquiry and modelling of best practice to support SENCos in their work to promote systemic change to maximise the culture of inclusion in school. This role in supporting quality assurance of inclusive practice across schools can translate well into the supervisory space, with EP supervisors able to engage collaboratively in a group setting to encourage reflection, conceptualisation and implementation of best practice examples that are shared and co-constructed between SENCo supervisees.

Experiential learning of this nature aligns strongly with the collaborative, social constructionist underpinning of current EP practice more so than a prescriptive dyad between a visiting 'expert' EP and commissioning SENCo. This kind of multidisciplinary supervision could therefore offer a further mechanism and forum through which EPs can be agents of positive change at a more systemic level.

From an organisational perspective, an EPS offer of group supervision for school staff could present an opportunity to demonstrate value and broaden understanding of the more systemic aspects of the EP role beyond individual assessment of CYP. This is

particularly salient in the case of offering SENCo group supervision as SENCos typically operate as the key contractor of EP time in schools. Improved understanding of the multi-faceted EP role among SENCos (the traditional focus of which has been individual level identification of need in CYP) could therefore inform future multidisciplinary working and shape the nature of EP involvement subsequently requested. The role of multidisciplinary supervisor also represents a professional development opportunity for individual EPs, not just in terms of informing the understanding of SENCos with which they work but as an opportunity to exercise and further develop the psychological skills of containment, facilitative consultation and reflective supervision. This is recognised in the DECP Professional Supervision Guidelines (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010) which highlights that 'multidisciplinary and multi-agency supervision is a growing area and one which offers many opportunities for EPs to develop and enhance their supervisory skills.' They report that an increasing number of EPs are providing some form of supervision for professionals outside of the EP profession, including the facilitation of group supervision.

#### *Process models of interprofessional group supervision*

Hanko's extensive work on group supervision approaches with teachers has informed an interprofessional consultation framework for group work with school staff (Hanko, 1985, 1999). She outlines a role for EPs as the consultant and facilitator of a staff group, in which the group members also serve a role as professional and emotional support to each other, while engaging in 'a process of joint exploration of a problem' (Hanko, 1999, p.9.) Her work emphasises the psychodynamic, educative function of

'collaborative problem solving' in which the EP facilitator guides rather than directs supervisees in the group to share their experiences.

This model of group supervision recognises the expertise within the group which, although distinct from the expertise of the EP, can be valued equally in arguably a more balanced power dynamic than is typical in supervision dyads of a senior professional or 'expert' directing and consulting to another. Hanko's psychodynamic approach (Hanko, 1985) does not draw on one sole psychological model but builds on interactional systemic thinking and encouragement of teachers (supervisees) to consider contextual factors around a CYP. Her group model recognises the dynamic within the group as a tool for sharing and recognising expertise as part of the process to reinstate teachers' confidence in their competence and reflect on the impact of emotional factors on their practice. Hanko recognises the 'group' as having one collective voice, based on the constructions of interacting opinion and perspectives shared by individuals.

Farouk's (2004) work has built on Hanko's approach to explore the early phases of establishing a supervision group and developed guidance to support the formation of such groups in practice. Farouk's process model includes clear guidance on preliminary efforts to establish clear understanding of the purpose of the group, clarification of roles and meeting process, as well as considering ethical ground rules like confidentiality and mutual respect (Farouk, 2004). The importance of engaging where possible with the management team is highlighted as valuable in the early stages of establishing a consistent supervision group process and attendance, as well as respecting engagement as entirely voluntary on behalf of the individual.

Farouk's dual role as supervisor and researcher allows for insight into the process of delivering the group consultation sessions. However, in the context of research exploring supervisee experiences, it is important to recognise that research conducted by the supervisor may represent a limitation if participants are less able to reflect their lived experiences without possible bias (for example in giving socially desirable answers).

## **Evaluating supervision**

Given the ranging definitions, processes and professional contexts of supervision, it is important to consider how best this practice can be robustly explored in the present research context and what can be learned from current research across a range of professional settings.

The challenge of how best, if at all, to evidence impact of professional supervision beyond the supervisee (i.e., impact experienced by colleagues or service-users supported by the supervisee) is an issue that has been proposed for further research and professional discussion (Ayres et al., 2015). This follows longstanding recognition of the difficulty in isolating the role of supervision among many other intervening variables at play, alongside different conceptualisations of supervision observed in the profession and literature (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012).

A further barrier is the lack of transparency around methodological processes and supervision arrangements among existing literature, as was identified by a review of empirical research in clinical supervision (Kühne et al., 2019).

Despite this, review of North American research into group supervision in the context of trainee counselling (Mastoras & Andrews, 2011) has supported direct exploration of supervisee experiences of group supervision as a relevant methodological approach:

*What is clear, above all else, from the studies discussed here is that supervisees have a voice - their opinions, insights, and suggestions may continue to provide insight into supervision practices that can be enjoyable and beneficial for all members of the supervision group. (Mastoras & Andrews, 2001, p.110)*

This recognises the central role played by supervisees in the supervision process (Milne, 2009). Indeed, the potential influence of supervisee perception and experience on the overall impact of supervision is highlighted as this can shape the extent to which supervisees utilise the benefits it can provide (Proctor, 2008).

To explore the perceptions of those involved directly in supervision, research into peer group clinical supervision for nurses (Saab et al., 2021) gathered qualitative perspectives from nurse supervisees, managers and supervisors. From this, they identified benefits of group supervision including stress reduction problem solving, managing change and improved prioritisation of tasks (Saab et al., 2021).

When considering the mechanism of such benefits, research into professional supervision has identified a common difficulty in separating processes or tasks relating to line management from providing a more reflective professional development space. This is because supervision can offer support across prioritising workload and effective, autonomous work (associated with line management) *and* provide psychological containment in a safe, non-judgemental space for reflection (important to professional



supervision). For example, a meta-analysis of 27 research articles published between 1990 and 2007 identifies both task assistance and social and emotional support as key dimensions of supervision, which facilitate beneficial outcomes for supervisees, like professional effectiveness and wellbeing, as well as offsetting the experience of detrimental outcomes, like stress and burnout (Mor Barak et al., 2009).

Further to the benefits of emotional and task management support through supervision, research conducted in New Zealand exploring interprofessional supervision dyads identified shared themes between supervisors and supervisees regarding the benefit of perspective brought by someone from another profession (Davys, 2017). This study also highlighted the value both supervisors and supervisees derived from developing greater interprofessional understanding through engagement with the supervision.

Mastoras & Andrew's review highlights a need for more in-depth research to explore the experience of supervisees and identify relevant ways to enhance this practice (Mastoras & Andrews, 2011). Knowledge of key facilitating factors and possible barriers to the experience of positive supervision outcomes could inform proactive efforts to optimise practice. A number of 'enabling factors' and barriers to effective supervision were identified in a review of international literature around clinical supervision across healthcare professions between 2009 and 2019, (Rothwell et al., 2021). This review identified regularity and protection of time for supervision, with flexible delivery in a private space, as facilitating factors. Additionally, relationship factors (like trust and shared understanding) and contracting (like agreeing supervision purpose, needs and means of feedback) between supervisee and supervisor also enabled positive outcomes of effective supervision. On the other hand, Rothwell and colleagues (2021)

identified barriers such as a lack of time and space, as well as relational barriers like a lack of trust and shared understanding. Lack of support and engagement at a leadership and organisational level were also identified as more systemic barriers to effective supervision practice in this context.

Conclusions from the broad and disparate literature surrounding different dynamics, models and outcomes of supervision highlight a need for greater transparency in supervision research. Greater clarity on methodological approach and measures used to explore experiential outcomes of supervision could inform wider exploration of this practice to build on the growing evidence-base. Considering the range of professional contexts in which supervision operates and the varying definitions or models used, it is salient for researchers to clarify the key concepts and assumptions underpinning their research, with transparency as to their specific research context.

## **Research context**

The present research is conducted in a Shire County where SENCo supervision groups have been facilitated by EPs from the Local Authority (LA) EPS since the beginning of the 2020-21 academic year. This offer continued into the 2021-22 academic year, so the participating cohort of SENCos from early years, primary and secondary settings included those who were new to supervision and some who were continuing from the previous year, with groups newly formed each Autumn. Supervision sessions were conducted predominantly online via Microsoft Teams though some group sessions were conducted in person, when covid risk assessment guidance allowed and if preferred by the individual participants of the group.

As reflects the pragmatic and dynamic culture of the service, there was not an expectation for individual EP supervisors to follow a standardised structure or model when conducting group meetings. EP supervisors were able to identify and implement a format and process of supervision that worked best for them as individual practitioners and the needs of their specific group. Training and resources were provided for EP supervisors to introduce or refamiliarise individual supervisors with a range of supervision models from which they may choose to apply or adapt within their own groups. These models and approaches included group consultation (Farouk, 2004; Hanko, 1999), Reflecting Team (Andersen, 1987; Bartle & Trevis, 2015), Circle of Adults (Wilson & Newton, 2006), and Solution Circles (Forest & Pearpoint, 1996.)

Models based on group consultation and on solution circles were most used among EP supervisors, with time management of different phases to discussion for example from a problem being presented to further questions being asked and ideas shared. Other groups adopted a flexible session format and contracted a preferred process or adjusted suggested timings depending on the issues brought for discussion. Some EPs prompted their supervisees to email ahead with topics they would like to bring whereas other groups shared this within the session to identify overlapping themes or prioritise points to cover as a group. A common feature across different group sessions was the use of some form of 'check-in' activity in which SENCo supervisees could indicate their emotional state coming into the session, before a structured problem-solving process or more detailed discussion of topics to cover was initiated.

Peer supervision sessions were also conducted throughout the year for EP supervisors of SENCo supervision groups to support professional reflection, sharing and

development of supervisory practice, while also offering a space to identify common themes across groups like barriers to SENCo attendance and problem solve for future EPS provision.

As a result of the different supervision formats between groups, it is likely that SENCos' understanding and experience of 'group supervision' might vary depending on their group allocation and individual EP supervisor, as well as the inter-personal dynamic and attendance within the group. It is therefore interesting to explore whether there are common themes or highly individuated responses amongst the conceptualisations, experiences and perceived impact of group supervision reported by participating SENCos.

As part of the typical graduated 'plan-do-review' process of service delivery, an initial evaluation was conducted within the LA EPS to gather feedback from the previous cohort of SENCos engaging with group supervision in the academic year 2020-2021. Survey responses included positive qualitative feedback which was further evidenced by continued uptake of the SENCo supervision group offer by many returning SENCos, and more, the following year (2021-2022). The EPs supervising the SENCo groups valued the opportunity to receive feedback on their supervision and reflect on further improvements and adaptations to delivery and allocations for the future. This process of evaluation supports reflexive practice for individual EPs and ongoing quality assurance of work from EP supervisors across the EPS, informing the service offer going forwards. This unique local context and cohort of SENCos represents a case study setting in which to thoroughly explore the experiences of SENCos engaging with professional

group supervision, facilitated by an EP, in groups with other SENCOs from schools in their local area.

## **Focus of the literature review**

Within the EP profession, reports of supervision practice, models and dynamics tend to focus on individual supervision, such as for TEPs on placement (Dunsmuir et al., 2015). However, rising demand from other professionals outside of EPS settings and commissioning of multidisciplinary supervision from EPs is acknowledged (Dunsmuir et al., 2015). Despite this, there appears to be a dearth of peer-reviewed research on the practical application and evaluation of interprofessional group supervision facilitated by EPs, particularly for SENCOs. Familiarity with the literature base highlighted this lack of SENCO-specific research and informed the focus of the present literature review to include relevant research around interprofessional group supervision conducted by EPs with any staff in schools.

## **Literature search process and terminology**

A systematic literature search was conducted to identify extant research around experiences of professional group supervision delivered by EPs for SENCOs and other school staff supporting CYP. (Further details can be found in Appendix A.)

The aim of this process was to identify and review relevant research and highlight formative examples of research publications which offer methodological or theoretical insight and critical reflection to inform the development of the present study.

### Literature search terminology

The varying definitions and core aims of supervision are recognised to overlap with other psychological processes and constructs, as highlighted by Scaife who notes that supervision 'includes what some authors have defined as 'consultation' (Scaife, 2001, p.4.) Indeed, Hanko's foundational early work in this research area discusses the concept of 'consultation' (1989) which is developed further into an emphasis on 'collaborative problem-solving' in later years (1999). It is therefore important to consider all relevant terminology to capture relevant literature for the area of interest. As such, informed by initial reading using a snowballing strategy via reference lists from the framing theoretical literature above, the subsequent literature search included broader terms like 'consultation' and 'group work' in addition to 'supervision.'

### Systematic literature search process

This systematic literature search aimed to cast a wide net to capture further research papers relevant to this research topic, from which to then narrow down literature for narrative review, based on specific relevance and overlap with the context and questions of focus.

The literature search accessed studies through EBSCO (ERIC, PsychINFO,) Google Scholar and UCL Explore databases. A broad range of search terms were applied to capture potentially relevant research publications, based on aforementioned terminology and key features of the present research focus, such as "educational psychology" AND "group supervision." (See Appendix A for further details of search terms used.)

















Figure 3 provides an example of the limited search results when using specific key terms like ‘consultation,’ ‘supervision’ or ‘group work’ with the term ‘SENCo’ or ‘Special Educational Needs Coordinator,’ thus exemplifying the dearth of peer-reviewed research publications in this area. This reinforced the need to widen selection to include literature with other school staff besides SENCos, to draw on available insights around interprofessional group supervision in the school context.

### Figure 3

*An example of limited research literature identified with initial search terms*

#### Search History/Alerts

[Print Search History](#) [Retrieve Searches](#) [Retrieve Alerts](#) [Save Searches / Alerts](#)

<input type="checkbox"/> Select / deselect all <input type="button" value="Search with AND"/> <input type="button" value="Search with OR"/> <input type="button" value="Delete Searches"/>			
Search ID#	Search Terms	Search Options	Actions
<input type="checkbox"/> S8	 senco AND consultation group	<b>Expanders</b> - Apply equivalent subjects <b>Search modes</b> - Boolean/Phrase	 <a href="#">View Results</a> (0)
<input type="checkbox"/> S7	 senco AND Educational psychologist AND group	<b>Expanders</b> - Apply equivalent subjects <b>Search modes</b> - Boolean/Phrase	 <a href="#">View Results</a> (4)
<input type="checkbox"/> S6	 SENCo AND clinical supervision	<b>Expanders</b> - Apply equivalent subjects <b>Search modes</b> - Boolean/Phrase	 <a href="#">View Results</a> (1)
<input type="checkbox"/> S5	 senco AND group consultation	<b>Expanders</b> - Apply equivalent subjects <b>Search modes</b> - Boolean/Phrase	 <a href="#">View Results</a> (0)
<input type="checkbox"/> S4	 senco AND supervision	<b>Expanders</b> - Apply equivalent subjects <b>Search modes</b> - Boolean/Phrase	 <a href="#">View Results</a> (1)
<input type="checkbox"/> S3	 senco AND Educational psychologist AND supervision	<b>Expanders</b> - Apply equivalent subjects <b>Search modes</b> - Boolean/Phrase	 <a href="#">View Results</a> (0)
<input type="checkbox"/> S2	 group work AND SENCo	<b>Expanders</b> - Apply equivalent subjects <b>Search modes</b> - Boolean/Phrase	 <a href="#">View Results</a> (1)
<input type="checkbox"/> S1	 group supervision AND SENCo	<b>Expanders</b> - Apply equivalent subjects <b>Search modes</b> - Boolean/Phrase	 <a href="#">View Results</a> (0)

## Literature selection and exclusion criteria

Identified publications were screened for relevance to the current research interest, i.e., impact of interprofessional group supervision on supervisee practice, wellbeing and professional understanding and the professional context., i.e., EP supervision in or across school systems.

Relevance to the present research also meant alignment of conceptualisation behind key terminology, like supervision. So, where the search identified literature based on use of the term “supervision” but (upon reading) operated a different intended meaning, e.g., the oversight of professionals for performance management purposes, these studies were excluded as not relevant to the present research focus and conceptualisation of supervision.

Literature such as thesis publications and independent guidance documents were excluded on the basis that they have not gone through the same rigorous peer-review process as published journal articles, to ensure a consistent level of quality assurance. Papers which lacked methodological transparency were excluded from review if failing to offer insight into the particular supervision arrangements, participant numbers and measures used. For example, Ayres and colleagues report positive experiences of Family Support Key Workers (FSKWs) within a review of EPS supervision policy and practice but do not provide details on the researcher positionality, survey measure used, numbers of FSKWs involved or the specific models or arrangement of interprofessional supervision in this context (Ayres et al., 2015).



## Narrative literature review findings

This narrative review of the limited existing literature aims to explore how school staff supervisee experiences have been measured, what (if any) impact was identified in relation to supervisee wellbeing and practice, and which systemic factors, if at all, were identified as relevant to supervisees' experience. Key studies selected through the literature search process are introduced briefly below with an outline of their presented methodology (see Table 1 below for summary.)

**Table 1**

*Summary of literature included in narrative review*

	<b>Authors</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Professional sample &amp; size</b>	<b>Data collection method</b>
1	Osborne & Burton	2014	270 Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) from schools across one Local Authority	Survey
2	France & Billington	2020	5 ELSAs from 4 schools.	Semi-structured interviews
3	Willis & Baines	2018	12 School staff members from one SEMH special school	Semi-structured interviews
4	Rae, Cowell & Field	2017	8 teachers from 2 SEMH special schools	Semi-structured interviews
5	Reid & Soan	2019	7 school staff members (SENCOs and Senior Leaders)	Survey

Research is then grouped for further critical discussion based on relevant learning around identification of impact on staff practice and wellbeing, and of influential systemic factors.

## How can school staff experiences of interprofessional group supervision be evaluated?

Although the work of Farouk (2004) and Hanks (1999) informs the formation and process of collaborative, psychodynamic group supervision, there is little exploration of the later evaluation stages and means of measuring the impact of these group processes. Impact evaluation and monitoring of progress forms an important part of the graduated approach to EP work and the professional discipline of evidence-based practice. It is therefore important to consider how best to identify the outcomes of supervision. The review of existing research will help to critically analyse existing evidence, identify appropriate methodologies considering the challenges associated with evaluating the external output from a psychological process and experience of group supervision:

1. Osborne and Burton (2014) surveyed 270 Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) asking their views on the group supervision they were receiving from EPs in their Local Authority service. They conducted a thematic analysis to identify overarching themes arising from the data. This study describes group supervision conducted by an EP for two hours every half term in groups of up to eight ELSAs (Osborne & Burton, 2014).
2. More recent small-scale research by France and Billington (2020) conducted semi-structured interviews with 5 qualified ELSAs from 4 different schools within a county which had experienced interprofessional supervision groups led by EPs (France & Billington, 2020). Their sample represented 33% of the trained ELSA cohort in the county. Both deductive and inductive analyses were conducted to identify relevant themes around the research questions of interest:

- i. What are ELSAs' views about the mechanics of group supervision including group size, timings, and locations?
  - ii. What are ELSAs' views of the usefulness of group supervision?
  - iii. If at all, how do ELSAs feel that group supervision has supported their professional development?
3. Willis and Baines (2018) explored use of supervision groups within the case study context of one SEMH special school setting catering to 86 SEMH pupils, using semi-structured one-to-one interviews with school staff to gather their views (Willis & Baines, 2018). 12 staff members were interviewed and representative of teachers, TAs and administration staff attending the groups. Their exploratory method, underpinned by a constructionist worldview, is recognised to fit well with the social and experiential focus of the research, where external observation or measures of change would not successfully address the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
4. Rae, Cowell and Field (2017) conducted an exploratory study with teachers in two special schools in England supporting CYP with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (now described as SEMH needs in the modern professional context). One school context was described as a day and residential co-educational special school for primary aged children, the other as a non-residential co-educational special school for CYP aged 6 to 16. Their sample of teachers included 8 teachers with experience of supporting pupils with SEMH needs ranging from 3 months to 24 years. This study used convenience, opt-in

sampling to recruit teachers for semi-structured interviews, before using conventional content analysis to review the data .

5. Reid and Soan (2019) conducted a small-scale study to explore the views and experiences of SENCOs and senior leaders receiving six 2-hour supervision sessions a year, over 2 years. Supervision was delivered to 4 participants on a one-to-one basis and to 3 participants as a group. They collected exploratory survey data from the seven participants at 3 time points over 2 years with a view to evaluating changes over time. The survey explored the following questions:
  - i. What is the participants' understanding of the purpose of supervision?
  - ii. What aspects of their role do they think benefits from engaging in a process of supervision?
  - iii. What do they envisage the impact of engaging in supervision is in terms of their well-being?
  - iv. What are the main goals of supervision in terms of their practice?
  - v. How would they describe their expectations from involvement in the supervision service, both personally and professionally?

From these examples of emerging practice and literature around interprofessional group supervision in schools, it is recognised that various different methodologies are being used to evaluate this practice. The majority of the research is small-scale and caution is noted that findings should be interpreted as salient to the specific case study context in which data was collected. Thus, generalisations outside of this context are not justified based on this design.

In contrast to the experiential lens taken in the studies above, Falender and Shafranske, (2012) suggest a competency-based approach to identify knowledge, skills, values and attitudes of supervisees prior to and during or after engagement with professional supervision, with a view to highlighting areas of development observed as evidence of impact. The challenge in developing measures of impact within an emerging area of professional practice is sensitivity to how those measures may go on to shape the way the practice itself may be viewed. This is because research is an interactive process that engages with the systems of interest, in this case – asking SENCOs to complete a survey for example. This means that using research tools which seek to make objective the process of externally evaluating changing practice and wellbeing (e.g., through pre- and post- measures of competency, requiring external scoring or observation from senior leaders) could influence how those being supervised or providing the scores view supervision as a practice. Competency scoring pre- and post- could therefore reinforce a misconception of supervision in schools as being intended as a performance management tool driven by external outcomes and individual comparison. Thus, experiential research at this exploratory phase could therefore be seen to enable supervisees to feel more self-directed in their goals and personally evaluate their experience. In reviewing the data collection methods to gather and explore supervisee perspectives, the five identified studies use either survey or interviews.

A critical reflection on the efforts of Willis and Baines' (2018) study to avoid bias arising from the primary researcher's familiarity with the setting, is the possible cost to the analytic process of reflection arising from in-depth data familiarisation. Aspects of the method chosen, such as frequency reporting of codes (how many participants and times

referenced), use of third-party transcription and inter-rater checks conducted by research assistants on codes, seemed potentially at odds with recognition of the subjectivity and interpretation typical to this form of reflective qualitative analysis and social constructionist research. It is noted that the themes generated appeared to map neatly onto the original research questions. Research employing a social constructionist and reflective lens to exploratory questions might include evidence of where participant views and experience explicitly shaped the conceptualisation of the findings by the researcher, if maintaining a purely data-driven approach to analysis and presentation of experiences.

Reid and Soan, (2019) use a longitudinal approach to collecting supervisee data in response to their five research questions outlined above. In line with ongoing supervision experience, this approach allowed the researchers to show the increasing awareness and emphasis on the benefits of supervision recognised by supervisees. However, for researchers looking to understand the content of what supervisees experienced across those 2 years, the thematic analysis allows for greater insight into the consistent areas of impact identified by supervisee: professional safety, professional resilience, and professional development. It is the reporting of specific language and themes that emerged as consistently significant during analysis, such as 'purposeful', alongside quotes to provide contextual detail, that helps to more clearly present the supervisee experience to outside readers.

## What is the impact of interprofessional group supervision on school staff well-being?

Osborne and Burton's (2014) inclusion of open answer questions within the survey allowed for collection of qualitative insights into ELSA experience and highlight the impact of group supervision on feelings of isolation and collective professional identity: 'The "you are not alone" when at times you feel that you are not being effective or have a problem. It is very valuable;' 'The support from others in the same role is so valuable.' The experience of loneliness within a school setting (as ELSAs typically operate alone as the sole person holding that particular role in school) is something that is reflected in the limited research into SENCOs experience as an isolated professional in school (Curran & Boddison, 2021).

The role of supervision in offering support and protected time to develop a sense of professional self-efficacy, manage capacity demands and recognise the emotional impact of challenging work with CYP is evident in more recent research: For example, ELSAs engaging in group supervision reported increased confidence in their role (Osborne & Burton, 2014) which arguably relates to sense of self-efficacy and professional wellbeing more generally.

On the other hand, a group supervision structure allows for connection with others in similar professional situations who can empathise with the challenges of the role and share insight into strategies or solutions experienced to be effective in similar contexts: '*Unlike one-to-one supervision, the group provides a supportive atmosphere in which new staff or trainees can share anxieties and realise that others are facing similar issues.*' (Hawkins & Shohet, 2006, p. 152).

Recent small scale-studies exploring different applications of interprofessional group supervision in school settings converge in their findings of supervisees reporting the restorative nature of their experience both professionally and personally (Reid & Soan, 2019; Willis & Baines, 2018). These studies also highlighted supervisees' recognition of the opportunity to build a greater sense of camaraderie with their colleagues as a function of the supervision group. Similarly, themes of relationships and emotional support highlighted the support network that can arise from the supervision group in which professionals are able to feel connection with professionals from other school systems (France & Billington, 2020). As well as ELSAs, this is particularly pertinent for roles like SENCo where individuals can otherwise experience professional isolation in their own setting day to day (Curran & Boddison, 2021).

Reid and Soan (2019) highlight the increasing emphasis and recognition of the benefits of interprofessional supervision reported by supervisees over 2 years. At the start of the study, they identified feelings of work-related stress, anxiety, uncertainty about how to manage and efforts to cope alone which align with the broader picture of teacher wellbeing reflected across the literature (Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2021). From participant reports of their experience of supervision, a key theme identified was the experience of professional safety and need for a confidential and non-judgemental space. Another theme that emerged from this study was that of professional resilience, with supervisees recognising the role of supervision in supporting stress management and preventing burnout, renewing professional commitment (sense of vocation) and the ability to 'keep on keeping on.' The restorative impact of supervision was highlighted as the main purpose and function of supervision, allowing supervisees to take care of themselves to



be able to take care of others. Recognition of this restorative space aligns with a key component of Proctor's conceptualisation of supervision, yet the supervisees appear to identify not only a function of 'restoration' but also of protection, in building resilience going forwards.

This study, although exploring the views across staff receiving individual and group supervision, does not offer in-depth insight into the perceived role of the group in supporting the restorative function of supervision. Future research stands to gain from specifically exploring supervisee views on the impact of the group (i.e., dynamic, identity, and space) to inform understanding about this aspect of the interprofessional group supervision practice.

#### What is the impact of interprofessional group supervision on school staff practice?

In relation to exploring the impact of the group on supervisee practice, Osborne and Burton (2014) acknowledge the challenge of identifying a definitive link between support received in group supervision and subsequent changes to professional practice.

While recognising this, studies adopted an experiential lens and identified perceived changes to supervisee practice which supervisees attributed to be a function of supervision experience. Specifically, ELSAs perceived their engagement with supervision to have positively impact their personal and professional development through improved knowledge, awareness, skills confidence and sense of status within school (Osborne & Burton, 2014). A benefit of this study (with respect to informing the present research) is that they specifically asked the ELSAs for their views on the perceived impact of their supervision on the CYP receiving ELSA support and any

particular benefits they associated with group supervision. Their findings highlight the advantages of group supervision as perceived by ELSA supervisees, with key themes relating to the 'sharing of ideas, experiences and resources ( $n = 226$ ).'

It was also noted that three ELSAs raised reservations, with one suggesting that a training day could fulfil a similar purpose and two reporting that 'group supervision could be helpful, but not in the present format' (Osborne & Burton, 2014). This reflects a vast majority of participating ELSAs who recognise particular value of supervision in a group context. A limitation of this study therefore lies in lack of opportunity for follow-up and in-depth exploration of possible disconfirming cases, where differing views and reservations were shared by a minority of participants. Additional methodological steps such as conducting a selection of follow-up interviews could have supported greater learning into the experiences of these individual ELSA supervisees, their perception of the supervision process and insight into how they feel alternative group supervision structures or processes might have better served them.

Other formative benefits identified across recent small-scale studies (France & Billington, 2020; Reid & Soan, 2019; Willis & Baines, 2018) include supervisees being provided a framework to discuss challenging situations from their real-world experience, allowing time to consider the many possible avenues available and contributing factors at play with the complex problems they face in their roles. In particular, Willis and Baines (2018) reported supervisees perceiving benefit to the opportunity to work in groups as it allowed supervisees to pool their expertise within the group, offering professional support through discussion of relevant strategies. When reporting on the benefits of interprofessional group supervision perceived by school staff, developing

professional practice was a key theme identified. France and Billington noted mixed responses among ELSAs to the structured problem-solving model presented in supervision, some of whom valued it as a good use of time whereas others felt it only allowed for one person to have their problem solved. This suggests individual variation in perceived value of structured supervision processes but consistent themes across studies identified the offer of these problem-solving models as valued.

Alongside opportunities to reflect on practice and to discuss coping strategies, 9 of the 12 supervisees in Willis and Baines' (2018) study interviewed also identified a positive impact on pupils. There was a lack of further detail around this finding to contextualise, for example in what ways staff identified their experience of supervision impacting professional practice in a way that benefitted pupils. Review of other interview data shared around offloading of pressures suggests one means of impact on pupils may have been in staff reflecting on their relationships with the children they support, i.e., supervision prompting reflection on how staff empathise and interact with pupils. Future research could specifically ask participants to share examples of how supervision has influenced their interaction with service-users if seeking to gain more clarity on what the perceived extended benefits of supervision looked like to supervisees in practice.

#### What are the systemic barriers and facilitators to school staff experiences of interprofessional group supervision?

The purpose of the present research project is to investigate how professional group supervision (facilitated by EPs) is experienced by SENCOs. Given the in-built supervisory structures within the EP profession, for EPs at every stage of training and

practice, and a growing interest in the systemic role of EPs outside of individual, statutory casework, it is relevant to investigate how interprofessional supervision can impact practice and wellbeing within the systems in which EPs operate.

Rae and colleagues (2017) identified the role of the EP in the supervision process as a key theme underpinned by both the EPs' contribution to supervision and the perceived role of the EP among supervisees (Rae et al., 2017). Another more systemic theme identified the existing support mechanisms around supervisees, including cover for lessons and opportunities for reflection within the school system.

Reid and Soan (2019) highlight supervisee insights into the factors that ensure a constructive experience and outcomes from supervision, identifying the need for supervision to be a structured, independent and confidential process which is delivered in a 'safe space' for supervisees.

Overall, research highlights the importance of careful forethought when looking to implement supervision groups in school and that an embedded model is more sustainable than one perceived as an 'add-on' (Hanley, 2017). The culture of a school was noted as a relevant factor here in terms of likelihood that reflective practice like supervision becomes integrated, i.e., this is more likely in a school system and culture that already recognises the therapeutic role of education rather than one in which this view would be questioned, making supervision less likely to be prioritised (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008).

It is noted that the same external demands and systemic factors around professional capacity and wellbeing that contribute to a real need for SENCo supervision also

represent possible barriers to accessing supervisory support. Collecting views of SENCOs engaging in group supervision from different school microsystems allows insight into how the barriers and facilitators to this kind of professional opportunity may vary. This could inform understanding of best practice for schools in implementing supervision practice and has implications for EP Services offering interprofessional supervision.

Systemic factors like wider application of supervision learning and changing conversations in schools (France & Billington, 2020) also indicates scope for greater reach of supervision impact beyond the supervisee, when questions prompt and allow for systemic exploration of such examples.

### Summary of literature

Critical review of the available literature reiterates minimal empirical research into applications of interprofessional group supervision in schools and particularly in relation to supporting SENCOs. Emerging research into this area presents benefits to supervisees which align with the existing theoretical literature on supervision function (Proctor, 2008) offering formative development as well as restorative support. The one identified study recruiting SENCOs among senior staff in school does not differentiate participant data and experiences to help identify the SENCO voice as a standalone role in school with different demands to other senior staff.

The challenges of measuring impact directly may explain the methodological emphasis on data collection measures like questionnaires (including rating scales) within the limited literature to describe experientially rather than looking to overcome the

challenges of causally testing or inferring the impact of group supervision on professional practice. Further exploration of supervisee experiences and perceived impact on subsequent practice could be achieved through in-depth interviews to gather more qualitative insights into the supervisee experience of changing practice and any associations made with their engagement in group supervision.

## **The present study**

### Research aims and purpose

This study aims to develop understanding from the present case study context to contribute towards the limited research literature on the application of supervision within education as a growing area of EP practice. This will provide valuable insight into the perceptions of supervisees outside of the EP profession as to the impact of interprofessional group supervision and its relevance to staff working in this context, particularly the complex SENCo role. This study aims to gain insight into the supervision experiences of SENCos and the impact they perceive for themselves, their surrounding systems, as well as identifying broader factors which play a role.

The social constructionist lens to the present research supports the rationale to encapsulate SENCo views and experiences as a valuable 'metric' for impact, with recognition of language and narrative as important in the shaping professional understanding and meaning around supervision. Adopting a systemic lens allows for exploration of the possible wider impact of SENCo supervision to practice in schools as a function of improved understanding of professional roles and possible 'trickle-down'

effects. For example, seeking examples of how supervision learning or tools can be applied within school settings. Similarly, exploration of systemic factors that facilitate or present a barrier to effective SENCo supervision can inform an EPS-level approach to implementing supervision groups and optimising engagement with school systems to best support SENCo experiences going forwards.

The present research therefore privileges SENCo perceptions of impact, i.e., change they recognise from their own experience, and seeks to share these findings with due consideration of the individual and systemic context, to ensure reflexive and robust methodological practice.

### Research questions

This research aims to investigate the experiences of SENCos working in school settings who have engaged with or are continuing to engage with professional group supervision. This exploration is focused around these core areas of interest:

1. What impact do SENCos perceive their engagement with interprofessional group supervision to have had on them and their surrounding systems?
  - *How do SENCos perceive their experience of interprofessional group supervision to have impacted their professional and personal wellbeing?*
  - *How do SENCos perceive their experience of interprofessional group supervision to have impacted their professional practice and work to improve outcomes for service-users?*

- *Do SENCOs perceive their experience of interprofessional SENCO group supervision to have improved their understanding of the SENCO role and that of EPs?*
2. What system-level factors impact interprofessional group supervision?
- *What features, processes and/or mechanisms of group supervision did SENCOs particularly value or identify as impactful to their experience of interprofessional group supervision?*
  - *What external factors (such as within their school system) did SENCOs identify as facilitators or barriers to their experience of interprofessional group supervision?*



## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Philosophical positioning and assumptions**

It is important for researchers to have a thorough understanding of the philosophical worldview and assumptions that underpin their research and how these have influenced their research methodology (Creswell & Clark, 2011). This, and the positioning of the researcher, informs the approach to data collection and will shape interpretation of findings during analysis.

#### **Epistemology and Ontology**

This research adopts a relativist ontology, according to which the nature of reality is relative, constructed from subjective human experiences and perceptions rather than 'discovered' as an objective truth. This aligns with a constructionist epistemological position which views knowledge as subjective and contextualised, increasing with the broadening of lived experiences. In contrast to objectivist epistemology traditionally underpinning research in the natural science disciplines, social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2001) offers a relativist, pluralistic alternative. This recognises many different realities, as constructed and experienced by individuals across social groupings, each of which is equally correct. This social constructionist perspective aims to explore the multiple truths and experiences shared by individual professionals.

Within this philosophical paradigm, the researcher plays an active role as a participant interpreter rather than a passive observer. The mixed methodological approach uses

analysis of survey and interview data to describe, interpret and understand the group supervision experiences of SENCOs. This use of mixed methodologies underpinned by a constructionist epistemology recognises the dynamic interaction between participating individuals and their context, and the researcher conducting interviews.

Descriptive reporting of quantitative data across survey responses will be presented with qualitative survey findings and themes identified during analysis of interview data to further explore the experiences of group supervision and perceived impact among SENCOs. This psychological grounding will inform the researcher's analysis of emerging themes and subsequent implications for practice, shaping understanding of what works in terms of interprofessional group supervision in this context.

### Researcher Role and Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the dynamic process in which professionals 'engage in both personal reflection and broader social critique' (Finlay, 2008, p. 5). Reflexivity as a professional practice aligns with a social constructionist worldview which considers one's interactions with, and interpretations of, the professional context through the lens of one's own personal experiences. This recognises an individual's understanding as socially constructed through their lived experience and influenced by surrounding language and behaviours.

With the aim of practicing reflexivity as a practitioner and ensuring transparency as a researcher, it is therefore important to recognise the researcher's role and dual positionality as a researcher and TEP operating within the local context (LA EPS) in which this research is conducted. During TEP training, the researcher has experienced

teaching and opportunities to practice reflective group processes such as solution circles and reflecting teams. The researcher has experienced different examples of formal and informal supervision across placement services, both individual and group, with and without a designated facilitator.

During observation of two EP-facilitated SENCo group supervision sessions on placement, the researcher's role as 'passive observer' and shadowing TEP was explained, with the rationale for observation being professional development and interest in group supervision processes.

The researcher has developed separate working relationships with a small number of SENCos in the county area through involvement in statutory and traded work as part of the EPS. The researcher was not involved in the delivery of SENCo group supervision in any capacity, besides data collection as part of the present research. Transparency about anonymisation of results and methodological steps taken to recognise and minimise potential bias in the interpretation and written framing of findings is key and further details are outlined in Appendix I.

## **Design**

This research is conducted using a two-phase sequential mixed methods explanatory (case study) design. An online survey was developed, adapted from an existing evaluation tool piloted within the EP service, and disseminated (phase 1). Follow-up interviews were then conducted among a subset of survey respondents (phase 2).

This research is cross-sectional and observational, recording experiences of supervision and perceived impact among SENCos rather than for example, comparing

outcomes between intervention (supervision) and control (no supervision) conditions. Thus, although this research is 'exploratory' in its aims (i.e., seeking to explore the experiences of SENCOs and identify themes arising from the data rather than testing existing hypotheses for example), the present mixed methods design is described as 'explanatory' (Creswell, 2011) as qualitative data collected in Phase 2 (interviews) offer explanation of findings captured through quantitative data collection from Phase 1 (survey).

Research using a 'case study' design does not infer a specific methodological approach but involves looking at one particular instance of a phenomenon and the bringing together of data relating to that instance. As summarised in Simons' definition:

*“Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a ‘real life’ context. It is research-based, inclusive of different methods and is evidence-led. The primary purpose is to generate in-depth understanding of a specific topic (as in a thesis), programme, policy, institution or system to generate knowledge and/or inform policy development, professional practice and civil or community action.”* (Simons, 2009, p. 21.)

This research is ideographic (i.e., investigates individual differences and experiences) rather than nomothetic (i.e., trying to identify or extract laws from data), so aligns well with social constructionist positioning. As outlined by Gary Thomas, an ideographic case study develops ideas that are 'all based on a and rooted in a single picture – the picture drawn by the inquirer' (Thomas, 2015, p. 5). Reflexive thematic analysis of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022, adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2006) offered a

flexible approach to identify salient themes across participant experiences within the case study setting, while allowing for recognition of individual differences, contextual factors and researcher interpretation.

## **Procedure**

During Phase 1 of the research, data was collected from an online survey conducted among school SENCOs who were currently engaging with EP-led group supervision.

This survey was disseminated across a group of school SENCOs who were enrolled in an EP-facilitated supervision group with other SENCOs from schools in their Local Authority area. Consent was sought for follow-up contact (Phase 2) in the form of semi-structured online interviews to gather more in-depth qualitative data about SENCO experiences of supervision and its perceived impact. Participants were assured in both information sheet and consent form that consenting to follow-up contact by researchers would only relate to this research project, making clear their details would not be used for any further purposes beyond this study.

For quantitative data collected in response to questionnaire items with closed answer options, descriptive frequency statistics are reported. A conventional (i.e., data-derived) content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was used when reviewing response data from qualitative survey items. Key content is presented with exemplar quotes to contextualise the description of relevant findings. These survey findings informed the development of the interview questions and initial coding process relevant to subsequent reflexive thematic analysis of data from in-depth follow-up interviews

(Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes emerging from professionals' views, highlighting key narratives across SENCo experiences and factors identified as impactful to SENCos. This was followed by a process of member checking and disconfirming case analysis to scrutinise and further reflect on these emerging themes.

The online surveys took between 5-15 minutes to complete and semi-structured interviews (conducted with a selection of SENCo participants from Phase 1) ranged from 25-45 minutes long. The demand on participant time was a key consideration during development of survey and interview questions (as sample-specific concerns around professional capacity are an important factor to the research topic). This informed the semi-structured interview approach and flexibility given for SENCos to direct the amount of time and information they felt able to share with the researcher.

## **Participants**

### Professional sample

Case study sample: SENCos from primary and secondary schools across one Shire County who were engaged in group SENCo supervision facilitated by an EP from their LA EPS.

A sample of adult professionals was recruited (by email distribution of research materials) from a cohort of 102 SENCos who were enrolled at the start of the academic year of 2021-2022 for group supervision offered by their LA EPS. This cohort of

SENCOs was allocated across 13 groups of around 6-8 SENCOs, with each group supervised by a different EP from the EPS and invited to 5 supervision sessions across the school year. At the time of survey recruitment, attendance of group supervision sessions was understood to range from 3-7 SENCOs per session.

The SENCOs all worked in the one Local Authority area but came from a range of settings (urban and rural) across the county. The SENCOs were not involved in the selection of their EP supervisor or group but the LA EPS allocated supervision groups with the aim to bring together SENCOs and supervising EPs from similar geographical regions within the county. This was done to facilitate networking between local schools and to reduce travel distance for in person meetings if chosen. There were 4 groups led by EPs in the north of the county, 5 central groups, and 4 in the south.

Most supervision groups were made up of a mixture of SENCOs from primary and secondary school settings, with some individuals from the groups having been involved in SENCO supervision the previous academic year.

The majority of SENCOs enrolled in the supervision groups were from primary settings, though ten of the thirteen groups had at least one secondary SENCO within the group, meaning their supervision session content covered both primary and secondary education (and the transition from one to the other.) Two supervision groups consisted of SENCOs solely from primary settings. One supervision group was made up of mostly SENCOs from primary schools and two from Early Years settings, so the session content among this group will have covered Early Years and the Primary School transition as relevant to the specific supervisees.

The supervision group sessions were conducted online via Microsoft Teams or in person, depending on the preference of the group. SENCOs reported a mixture of modes for delivery with some groups choosing to meet entirely online and a minority of groups arranging most sessions to be in person when possible, typically hosted by SENCOs in their school on rotation across the group.

In line with the concept of supervision as a protected space for supervisee-directed reflection and development, the logistical delivery of the sessions and the specific content covered was agreed among the group of SENCO supervisees. This was contracted based on what was felt to best meet the needs of the supervision group and therefore could vary between sessions depending on the individuals attending the session. For example, if only 3 of the invited 8 group members were able to attend a particular session, the supervisees attending might agree in the session to use a different approach to previous sessions, such as adopting a less structured model or timing of discussions.

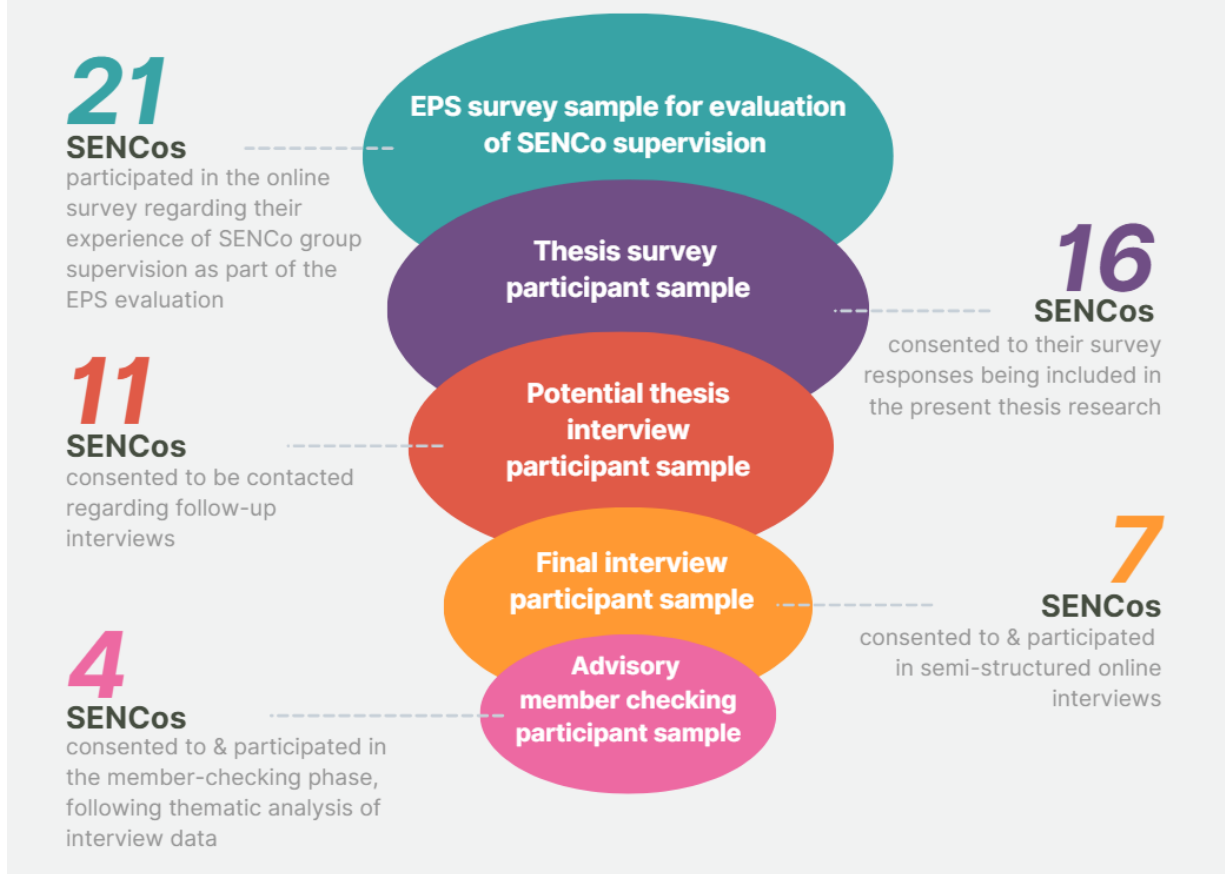
The final sample formed a nested structure with qualitative interview respondents representing a smaller subset of the SENCOs who responded to the online survey (see Figure 4 below).

#### **Figure 4**

*Sampling pipeline and numbers of SENCO participants throughout the study*



# Sampling pipeline



## Recruitment approach

Participants were purposively recruited using a volunteer sampling strategy where SENCos currently engaged in group supervision were contacted and those individuals willing or interested to self-selected to participate (Jupp, 2006) at each phase of the study.

All prospective participants therefore shared in a professional dimension of being SENCos in one county that are currently engaged in EP-led supervision groups. The cohort of SENCo participants formed a heterogenous sample in other respects, for

example in terms of their years of experience in the SENCo role, working in an urban or rural and primary or secondary school setting, SENCo age and gender.

### Contextual factors impacting participant response rates

As evident in the research literature reviewed in earlier chapters, high SENCo workload and stress is known and a contextual factor relevant to the rationale for this research. It also represents a barrier to both attendance of the group supervision sessions themselves and recruitment of a SENCo sample of survey and interview participants, as was experienced in the present research. Contextual factors recognised by the EPS were the logistical difficulties of aligning schedules to identify appropriate times for a professional group which experiences considerable variability of working patterns (i.e. many SENCos working part time and juggling other roles in school like teaching, making it difficult to find a consistent common time for groups of SENCos working in different schools.) As such, the present study faced a challenge in trying to engage any of those SENCos who struggled to attend the supervision themselves for recruitment as research participants to give their time to share views on their (potentially limited) experience of the sessions.

In terms of recruitment from Phase 1 into Phase 2 of the study, 4 SENCos consented to be contacted regarding interview follow-up to their surveys but did not go on to participate in the second research phase. 3 SENCos reported lack of capacity due to high workload as the reason for attrition and 1 SENCo was unavailable for interview as they had taken long-term sick leave due to stress, commencing between Phase 1 and 2 of the study.

## Measures

The development of novel research measures was informed by a piloting process, as recommended to test for potential difficulties and areas for revision prior to the start of formal data collection (Robson, 2011).

### Phase 1: Survey

This phase of the research involved the development of an online survey, informed by an existing supervision evaluation tool piloted and used in the LA EPS with SENCoS who engaged in supervision groups the previous year. This survey was further developed for the present research to include question items from the literature, and in collaboration with advisory TEP participants through piloting and ‘cognitive testing’<sup>1</sup>. Given concerns around wellbeing and limited capacity among the professional sample of SENCoS, piloting among TEPs who themselves had extensive experience of supervision and knowledge of the SENCo role was valuable to prioritise the most relevant questions to include in relation to the research questions without placing an additional burden on SENCo time outside of data collection itself. This piloting process was particularly helpful in the development of the survey measure to support the inclusion of a new survey question around the perceived impact of supervision on SENCo wellbeing, which had not previously been explored.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Cognitive testing’ of the online survey tool prior to dissemination refers to the technique and process used to test and improve survey questions. This was achieved by administering the provisional survey with advisory participants and getting feedback on the cognitive processes experienced in answering the questions. This helps to identify any issues with those questions (e.g., clarity of language used and sequence of questions, as well as time taken to access and complete) to make recommendations for improvements.

The online survey included both quantitative items with closed questions and fixed response options, as well as qualitative items allowing open responses.

This survey was built and disseminated online via the survey platform, Microsoft Forms from which response data was downloaded, anonymised, and processed for analysis.

## Phase 2: Interview

Conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of open answer SENCo survey responses identified inductive codes to inform the development of a semi-structured interview schedule to explore the research questions and individual experiences of SENCo group supervision in more detail. The semi-structured nature of the interview schedule and process allowed for exploration of the broad research questions with flexibility in responding to points shared during individual interviews (Robson, 2011).

This interview schedule was developed with use of research supervision and piloted among TEPs to gain feedback on the clarity, scope and sequence of questions, as well as the time frame to enable adjustments to support accessibility and flexibility of time commitment for final SENCo participants. Advisory SENCo participants gave feedback on the length of time they would give to participate in the interviews and indicated their motivation to speak on the topic of supervision and their experience when the research was clearly centred on the SENCo voice and an opportunity for them to share their perspective on supervision. This piloting and feedback process informed the decision to share the semi-structured interview schedule with questions to participants ahead of the interview itself, giving SENCos time to reflect on their answers and supporting transparency around the scope of the research. The piloting of the final interview

schedule among TEPs (drawing on their own experience of supervision and knowledge of SENCOs to participate as if a SENCO themselves) improved the coherence of interviewer delivery for subsequent participant-facing interviews and informed more accurate time expectations for delivering and answering the questions.

## **Analysis**

The social constructionist underpinning of this research recognises that different individuals will share different insights into the same phenomenon (i.e., group professional supervision).

### Analysis of survey data

For quantitative data collected in response to survey items with closed answer options, descriptive (frequency) statistics are reported.

Conventional content analysis was used to explore qualitative data collected from open answer responses to the survey. This approach is appropriate to identify meaningful clusters of content from inductive coding of data, when there is limited research literature available surrounding the area of interest (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The aim of this initial analysis was to contextualise the quantitative survey findings and ground the subsequent process of thematic coding of interview data.

## Analysis of interview data

To identify salient themes across SENCoS' responses and any disconfirming examples of interest, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) of interview data was used to explore SENCo experiences.

Unlike other qualitative analysis methods (like interpretative phenomenological analysis or discourse analysis), thematic analysis is a flexible process that is not attached to one particular epistemological position and can be utilised in a range of qualitative research contexts (Terry et al., 2017). It allows for the exploration of qualitative data and inductive identification of themes (rather than fitting data to a set of pre-existing assumptions or coding scheme). Thematic analysis offers an appropriate tool for the exploration of qualitative data to consider common threads across experiences shared by individual participants, while acknowledging the social context in which these experiences are constructed and influenced (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

This research and analysis across phase 1 and 2 was conducted to allow initial scoping of participant responses to research questions and then develop interview questions around content of interest from the qualitative survey responses and lines of enquiry that are most salient in light of the survey findings and aims behind the original research questions.

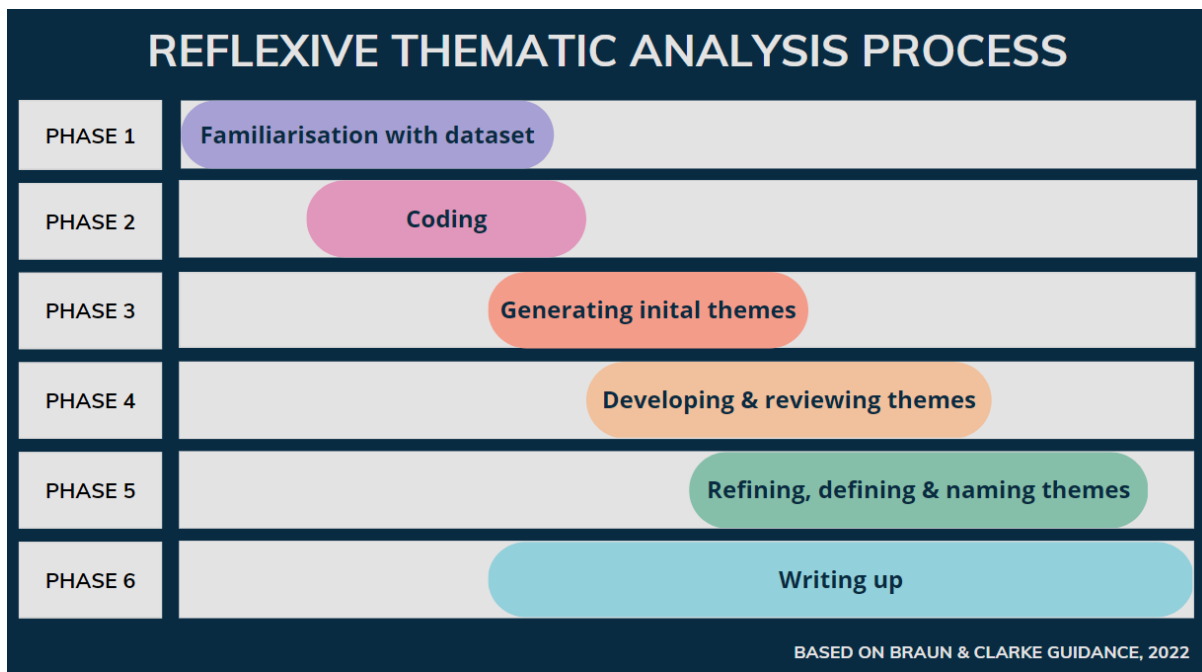
Subsequent member checking of themes with advisory SENCo participants, as well as conducting a disconfirming case analysis to challenge favoured lines of enquiry, ensured a critical and reflexive lens to analysis and interpretation of findings, with participatory opportunities as part of a robust and transparent process to identify

credible themes to discuss in relation to the specific case study context. Such analytical processes and outputs will be highly relevant to EPs within the Local EP Service who facilitate group supervision and can take learning from the findings to influence practice and the supervisory offer to local schools going forwards.

The reflexive thematic analytic process follows an iterative sequence that is phasic rather a linear sequence of distinct steps. This process follows recent guidance by Braun and Clarke (2022) and is presented visually in Figure 5 below:

**Figure 5**

*Visual representation of the Reflexive Thematic Analysis process*



### *Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data*

The primary researcher began familiarisation with the interview data by reviewing the interview recordings and revising the automated audio transcriptions generated via Zoom to ensure accurate transcription of SENCo views. As part of the familiarisation process and to ensure clarity of data, a process of transcription review and cleaning was conducted. This was done to remove erring and accidental repetition of words that can naturally occur in speech when forming verbal responses. The aim was to distil the interview data so the genuine content of an excerpt could be followed and understood by the reader, if otherwise it would become hard to follow. An excerpt is included in Appendix F to demonstrate the streamlining process and clarify consistent criteria used to minimise risk of researcher bias in interpreting 'relevant' text.

The Zoom transcriptions were transferred to Microsoft Word to allow for formatting of initial codes generated alongside relevant sections of text.

### *Phase 2: Initial coding and categorisation*

The coding process was completed on Microsoft Word using the 'comment' function to insert code labels alongside excerpts of text (see Figure 6 for an example). The transcripts were systematically coded, one participant at a time and these transcripts and codes were then reviewed multiple times. During this stage the researcher engaged in reflexive peer supervision and completed a reflexive journal of the thematic analysis process (excerpts included in Appendix E).



## Figure 6

### Example of initial transcript coding in Word

00:18:23 Speaker 1	
And were there any particular processes or features of the session that you valued the most?	
00:18:34 Speaker 2	
I think it was the we're in it together sense that we all had.	Von Spreckelsen... Knowing you're not alone
You know we all had similar concerns, it was very seldom that someone had an issue that one of us had not already had or was dealing with them, perhaps to a slightly lesser issue at lesser level or.	Von Spreckelsen... Recognition of shared
And so they were very much for me, being relatively new SENCo, the reassurance that I wasn't completely bonkers and that I was going down the right path with my thinking.	Von Spreckelsen... Reassurance as new SENCo of
I think that's probably the thing I took away from it most. It was definitely, I would say definitely a mental health boost.	Von Spreckelsen... Primary impact was to mental
You know, to feel like you've got a group of people who are in the same boat, and it was the same people each time.	Von Spreckelsen... Shared experiences
So you know, they became friends. Uh, how are you? How did you get on with that one last time we spoke about? And there would always be a touch base on what we spoke about last time, so that that was helpful, you know.	Von Spreckelsen... Consistency and forming
Someone would say 'oh I remember you spoke about child X, did you get that EHCP through, or did you decide not to reapply' and that just, you feel nurtured and you know you feel seen.	Von Spreckelsen... Review and check in of previous
Which when you sit in an office alone ploughing through paperwork and the case work. So yeah, it was good. It was supportive.	Von Spreckelsen... Nurtured experience, feeling
00:19:53 Speaker 1	
Thank you. OK so what would you say was the most important function of the supervision for you. And	Von Spreckelsen... Can typically feel alone in SENCo
	Von Spreckelsen... Supportive dynamic/experience

Once initial codes had been refined and comments reflected the final codes, the comments throughout the transcript word documents were downloaded into a table using a Microsoft Word macro plug-in called 'DocTools'. This software allowed the researcher to extract comments made on each document to then process that information within a table from which to search for emerging themes (see Figure 7 below).

## Figure 7

*Example of initial codes and excerpts, extracted from an interview transcript in Word into Excel table*

Ppt	Page	Line	Transcript excerpt	Initial codes
6	8	5	You know we all had similar concerns, it was very seldom that someone had an issue that one of us had not already had or was dealing with them, perhaps to a slightly lesser issue at lesser level or.	Recognition of shared experiences
6	8	7	they were very much for me, being relatively new SENCo, the reassurance that I wasn't completely bonkers and that I was going down the right path with my thinking.	Reassurance as new SENCo of own strategies/approach
6	8	11	I think that's probably the thing I took away from it most. It was definitely, I would say definitely a mental health boost.	Primary impact was to mental health 'boost'
6	8	14	to feel like you've got a group of people who are in the same boat	Shared experiences
6	8	14	it was the same people each time. So you know, they became friends.	Not alone
6	8	14	it was the same people each time. So you know, they became friends.	Consistency and forming relationships/friendships
6	8	15	Uh, how are you? How did you get on with that one last time we spoke about? And there would always be a touch base on what we spoke about last time, so that that was helpful, you know. Someone would say 'ohh I remember you spoke about child X, did you get that EHCP through, or did you decide not to reapply'	Review and check in of previous plans
6	8	17	Someone would say 'ohh I remember you spoke about child X, did you get that EHCP through, or did you decide not to reapply' and that just, you feel nurtured and you know you feel seen.	Nurtured experience, feeling seen/held in mind
6	8	19	when you sit in an office alone ploughing through paperwork and the case work.	Can typically feel alone in SENCo work

### *Phase 3: Search for themes*

Braun & Clarke (2022) highlight the process of visual mapping, specifically drawing thematic maps, as a valuable analytic practice: '1. For starting to think about provisional themes in their own right; 2. for exploring how provisional themes might relate to each other; and 3. for starting to consider the overall story of your analysis'. Figure 8 shows the early process of grouping initial codes together, with colours per participant to capture the salience of emerging themes across individuals. The use of physical (e.g., post it notes) and digital tools (e.g., Excel and Miro software) helped visualise emerging thematic groupings. For example, Figure 9 below shows a snapshot of an early map

based on deductive grouping of codes around key concepts and research question areas of interest.

**Figure 8**

*Grouping of codes based on similarity to identify emerging patterns*

Wellbeing impact	Professional practice impact	Supervision process	Group dynamic	EP role
Supervision helps mental health/managing personal impact of work	<i>Importance of space for strategic work to support positive change on bigger scale</i>	Supervision structure meant offloading didn't take over whole session	<i>Wealth of experience in group</i>	Like having same EP - continuity/familiarity
<i>Protected time for SENCo</i>	Learning from others	When it runs as intended, it is valuable. (Depends on how it is organised/structured?)	Helpful to know other SENCos already	Consistency of EP leading
<i>Recognising personal impact of role (stress)</i>	Able to bring concerns and trouble shoot - formative	Good Time management of sessions	Supportive dynamic	EP problem solving support
<i>Space to offload</i>	Seeking advice across a range of issues from administrative to practical	Standard process starting with check in	Positive dynamic – everyone is listened to and valued	EP role to pause/bring helpful questions to consider
Over time, supervision provided more restorative value	Came away from supervision with practical action points/ideas	Time management so everyone covered within session	Existing relationships with SENCos help open communication/sharing	EP reflective/curious other helping to pause and question
Individual mental health benefit to having that space	<i>Empowering SENCos to identify their own solutions</i>	Sense of direction to discussions so things to take away from it	Deepening relationships with other SENCos	EP role makes supervision different to SENCo group meetings
<i>Knowing you're not alone in your experience</i>	Developed SENCo knowledge eg administrative systems	Broad intro to sessions then led by what people raise which prompts further discussion	Didn't feel hierarchy within group	EP chairing not problem solving for SENCos
Looking forward to the meetings/	Impactful changes to approaches to supporting SEN CYP	Check in activity to support engagement - 'right space'	Helpful to know other SENCos already through other networking	EP identifying common themes
Knowing the time was protected/would happen	Sharing and reviewing ideas with others	One topic covered per meeting	<i>Variable attendance impacts/makes group dynamic tricky</i>	EP skill/knowledge in offering and maintaining structure for discussions
Feeling relief knowing supervision in place/upcoming session	<i>Able to gain ideas and problem solve with others</i>	Range of topics covered across sessions	Familiarity with other SENCos impacted discussion/most appropriate structure	EP led the group
Supervision as an outlet	Practical take-aways (and reduced stress) having talked through ideas even if not raised by them	Time management for covering multiple topics per session	Everyone positive, no blockages presented by individuals	valuing EP leading the sessions

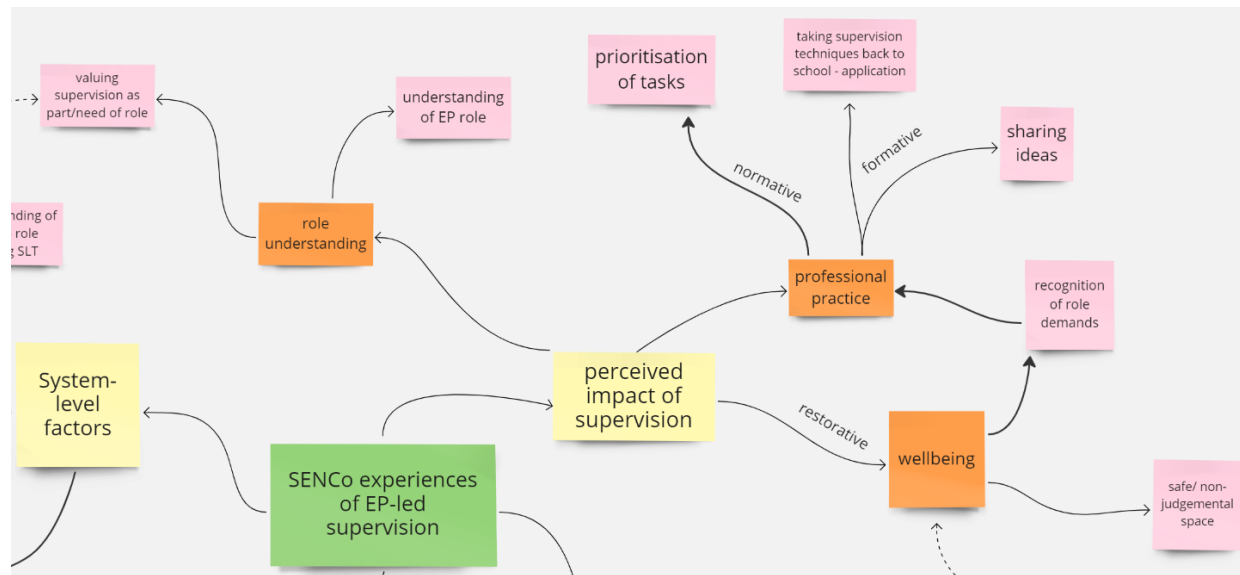
#### *Phase 4: Review of themes*

After initial themes had been generated, the researcher reviewed them relative to the transcript extracts to check the validity of the themes generated. Within this phase, the author grouped codes into clusters based on commonality and these groupings were reworked over time to distil the volume of meaningful data evidencing the theme. Overarching ('superordinate') themes were identified to link the different emerging areas

together. During this phase, thematic mapping and reflexive peer supervision was continually used to ensure themes were identified based on participant narratives and data rather than simply the original research questions. (Full thematic maps from Miro are included in Appendix G). This iterative visualisation process was invaluable to prompt critical reflection when reviewing identified themes.

**Figure 9**

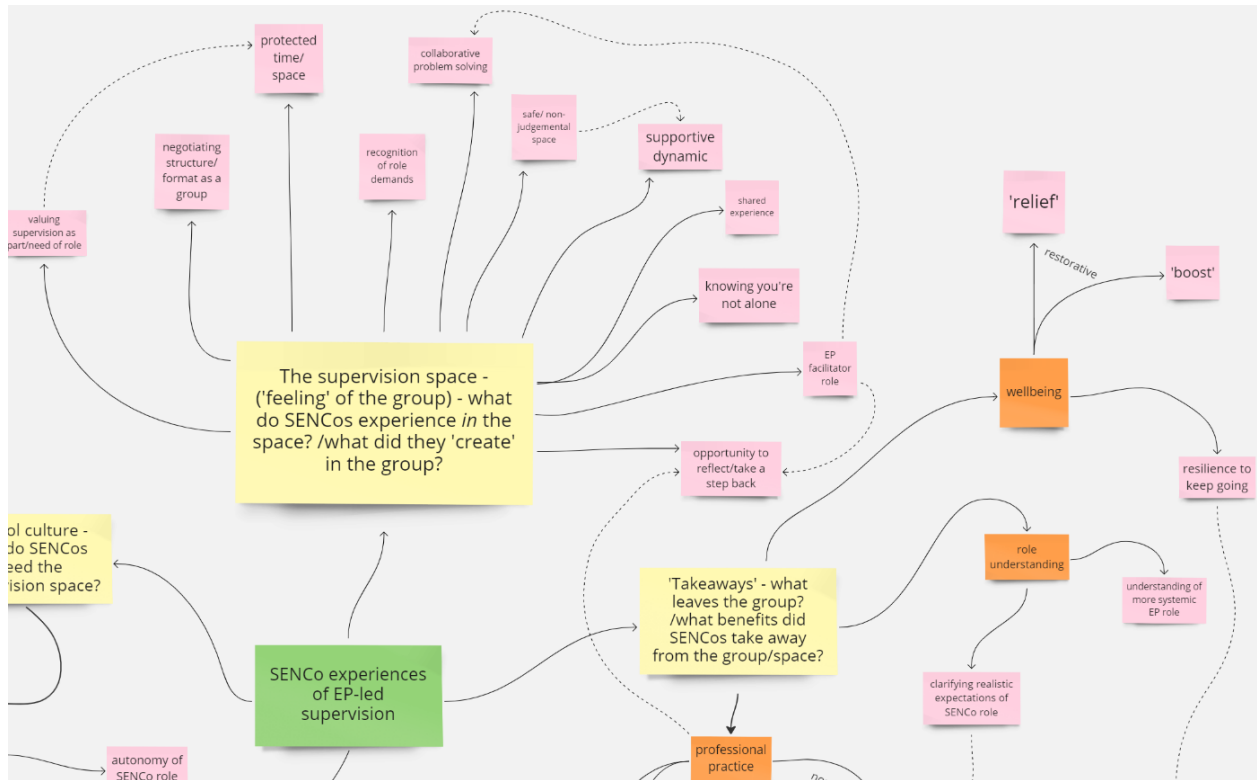
*Snapshot of an early (deductive) thematic map using Miro*



The subsequent reframing of my original ‘top down’ thinking based around my broad research questions (as in Figure 9 above) was supported by further mapping to generate an inductive map of SENCo experiences, shown in Figure 10 below.

**Figure 10**

*Snapshot of thematic mapping review using Miro to visualise emerging narratives*



*Phase 5: Defining and naming themes*

The researcher read through all coded extracts relevant to the associated theme to consider whether or not the original data fitted with the identified theme. Some subthemes and superordinate themes were renamed to better represent the emerging narratives and respective data.

Figure 11 below is an example of this process for theme 1 using a spreadsheet to search relevant data to check relevance and continue to hone the scope and description of themes.

**Figure 11**

*Spreadsheet snapshot of defining themes process*

Bronfenbrenner - relevant levels of the ecosystem	Superordinate Theme - working title/'topic' area	Superordinate theme - working title/name	Superordinate Theme descriptor	Subordinate Theme 'topic'/area.	Subordinate Themes - working title/name	Initial Codes	Exemplar quote (interview)	
Macro- (local/national context) and micro-system (school)	Professional context/pressures of SENCo role	SENCo need for supervision	Why do SENCos need the supervision space?	External demands	Professional demands of SENCo role	High level of SENeed	There's so many students with SEN, there's so many EHCP students across the county, [local authority] area but across the UK as well. (ppt1)	
						Immediate (operational) vs long-term, (strategic) aims	But being able to be strategic, I wasn't able to be, because it was so reactionary in terms of what was happening day to day (ppt7)	
						Huge scope of SENCo role	my role has expanded. So it takes into account all of the aspects of inclusion, such as attendance, pupil premium children, EAL. All of those sorts of things. When I first started, I didn't have any leadership responsibilities, but now I do have some leadership responsibilities. (ppt2)	
					Individual experience	Contextual factors for SENCos	Firefighting	when you're in school, you're racing, from one thing to another, and sometimes it can feel a bit like you're firefighting constantly. (ppt5)
							SENCos wear many other hats in school	I'm SENCo, I'm also a class teacher, and deputy head (ppt4)
				risk of becoming blinkered in same long term school environment	A lot of us work for a long time in the same school. There's not.. there sometimes is more movement, but not often. And you can sort of get a little bit blinkered. (ppt2)			
				SENCo working patterns	I think that that's probably I would suspect the biggest barrier to entry to the supervision is if the supervision day isn't your SENCo day, you can't get released from teaching or your other roles. (ppt6)			
				SENCos leaving the profession	I'm part of so many Facebook Forums of SENCos, and SENCos are constantly walking away from the job because it's so demoralizing at times. (ppt1)			
				Overwhelm/sense of individual responsibility	you can easily be swamped and drowning. (ppt 1)			
				SENCo role is lonely	I'm kind of sitting in my office trying to get through my list and no one else is doing the same job as I'm doing. (ppt3)			

*Phase 6: Writing up the analysis*

Themes were organised into a table alongside key exemplar quotes identified to demonstrate the theme. It is noted that some codes were identified to fit better with other subordinate themes during this phase, so reflexive supervision and a process of iterative review were used to support researcher thinking about how best to capture the data. These were then further reviewed as with phase 4 and 5. (See Appendix H for an example of thematic labels, descriptors, codes and exemplar quotes for Theme 1, developed from this process.)

## **Credibility, Reliability & Trustworthiness**

Lucy Yardley acknowledges that the principles of objectivity, reliability and generalisability (emphasised in quantitative research) are typically not considered to be as relevant within the field of qualitative research but provides a framework with which qualitative methods can be evaluated (Yardley, 2015). Please refer to Appendix I for further details on this framework with examples of how the present research addresses its criteria.

## **Ethical considerations**

This study obtained ethical approval in March 2022 from the UCL Institute of Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee. The following key ethical considerations were outlined during the ethics application process for review to ensure all areas were effectively addressed within the planning of the present research:

- informed consent
- confidentiality and anonymity of data
- data storage and security
- reporting and dissemination of findings
- safeguarding
- handling of sensitive information.

Further detail on how these considerations are addressed in the research is provided in the ethics application form included in Appendix L.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

### **Overview**

The present research questions explore how SENCo supervisees perceive their experience of interprofessional group supervision to have impacted them on an individual level, in terms of their wellbeing, understanding of professional roles and their professional practice, (i.e., how they deliver their role and interact with service-users) and at a systemic level, (i.e., impact perceived across their surrounding systems relating to supporting CYP with SEND). This study also sought SENCo perspectives on factors, both external (such as those at play in their school) and internal (within their supervision group and sessions), that impacted their supervision experience. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected across SENCo survey and interview responses, the findings from which are outlined below with inclusion of exemplar quotes where relevant to provide further context and insight.

### **6.2 Phase 1: Online SENCo survey**

#### **Data inclusion**

Survey data from 16 SENCos was analysed in Phase 1 of this study. Participants were not excluded for partially completed surveys as not all survey items were mandatory, in keeping with the pragmatic requirements of the EPS. To support transparency, total or percentages of respondents are reported per question when presenting quantitative findings. Quantitative survey data were reviewed alongside content analysis of



qualitative data from open answer survey items - brief exemplar quotes are included below where relevant to highlight emerging SENCo narratives around supervision which informed subsequent interview questions and thematic analysis.

### Data reduction

Peripheral findings (i.e., not linked to a priori research questions but data collected from survey items included for the wider EPS evaluation) are included for transparency, though appear in Appendix D to maintain focus on key findings relevant to the aims and questions of this study.

#### 6.2.1 SENCo survey response data

##### *Main findings*

The main findings from the SENCo survey data are presented below alongside the survey questions, which have been grouped by relevance to the respective research questions.

##### *SENCo perceptions of supervision and its benefits*

Survey question: How would you summarise SENCo supervision to someone who has not been before? What is it and what were the benefits?

The qualitative responses from SENCos highlighted key content in their conceptualisation of supervision and its benefits. Participants described a supervision as *'a structured session where you can share problems and work collaboratively with*

*other SENCOs to think through the problem and be guided towards different ways of thinking/solutions’ and to ‘reflect on everyday practice.’*

Other key content emerged around experiencing supervision as ‘a safe space for you to offload and share in a containing manner’ and ‘also a reminder that you are not alone and you are making a difference to young people and your colleagues.’

*RQ1. What impact do SENCOs perceive their engagement with interprofessional group supervision to have had on them and their surrounding systems?*

#### *Perceived gains from supervision experience*

Survey question: What do you feel you have gained from attending the supervision sessions? Please tick any/all that apply and add further examples or comments below if relevant.

#### **Table 2**

*Distribution of SENCO responses to survey options indicating outcomes gained through supervision*

Outcome selected in response	Frequency	% of respondents
I have developed my knowledge and skills	8	50
I was able to reflect upon our school’s provision for pupils with SEN	14	87.5
I have developed my support network	10	62.5
I have formed links with other SENCOs in my local area	12	75
I feel more confident in my role	9	56.25
I was able to reflect upon my school’s support for me in my professional role and wellbeing	9	56.25

The findings presented in Table 2 demonstrate that the range of hypothesised gains from supervision were all reported by at least 50% of participating SENCoS, with the most commonly identified gain being the opportunity to reflect on SEN provision in school.

Some SENCoS added further explanation or additional examples of gains they experienced from supervision, for example: *'I liked being able to take back ideas to SLT and share views of other schools with them; it gave me confidence to challenge/develop some of the practice in my school.'* Another SENCo highlighted that *'actions from meetings were followed through by all. From my perspective this did not feel like an addition to workload - but felt like we were being helpful to each other.'*

#### *Perceived efficacy and value of supervision*

Survey question: How effective and valuable did you find attending a group supervision session?

50% of SENCo respondents ( $N=8$ ) reported finding interprofessional group supervision sessions to be 'effective' and the other 50% of SENCoS 'very effective.' Zero SENCoS selected one of the negative or neutral response options available ('neither effective nor ineffective'; 'ineffective'; or 'very ineffective').

*RQ1.1 How do SENCoS perceive their experience of interprofessional group supervision to have impacted their professional and personal wellbeing?*

Survey question: Please indicate below how, if at all, you feel accessing the SENCo supervision group has impacted your wellbeing. Engaging in professional group supervision with other SENCoS has:

**Table 3**

*SENCo responses to survey likert scale indicating perceived impact of supervision on wellbeing*

Response selected:	Frequency	% of respondents
Significantly improved my wellbeing	3	18.75
Improved my wellbeing	11	68.75
Neither improved nor worsened my wellbeing (no impact)	2	12.5
Worsened my wellbeing	0	0
Significantly worsened my wellbeing	0	0

Table 3 demonstrates that the majority of SENCoS identified a positive impact of supervision on their wellbeing and 2 of the 16 SENCoS survey respondents reporting no impact. The qualitative follow-up responses shared key messages around feeling acknowledged and less alone, for example: *‘Just having other people recognise and empathise with the stresses and strains of SENCo role made me feel I was not alone in my worries and stresses, and that I was appreciated.’* Responses also described a sense of relief from supervision, such as *‘I always feel a lot better after a session, like a weight has been (temporarily) lifted off my shoulders!’*

One SENCo shared that *‘two of the sessions have come while I have had very difficult weeks at work and they have helped me to reflect and prioritise, and also to delegate more which has helped lessen my workload’* which suggests a normative function to the supervision which in turn has impacted wellbeing via reduced stress.

*RQ1.2 How do SENCos perceive their experience of interprofessional group supervision to have impacted their professional practice and work to improve outcomes for service-users?*

Survey question: Has your involvement in professional group supervision changed how you support other staff in your setting?

**Table 4**

*Distribution of SENCo responses reporting no, intended, or perceived changes to practice with school staff*

Response selected	Frequency	% of respondents
Yes	9	56.25
No	3	18.75
Not yet but I would like to next year	4	25

Table 4 demonstrates that the majority of SENCos have already or hope to make changes to how they support staff in their school. SENCo examples of these changes included introduction of staff supervision, including the need they felt this addressed in school. For example:

*‘I started running weekly sessions for teaching assistants to discuss what they're finding difficult and to work together to problem solve these issues together, following a similar model. This proved particularly effective for teaching*

*assistants in one class in school, which has a high level of challenging needs and previously had a very high staff turnover.'*

SENCOs also indicate learning from supervision about the need for containment and space to be heard: *'I have tried to use a similar approach when meeting with staff to ensure that they are not just being told what to do, but also listened to in terms of their concerns.'*

*RQ2. What system-level factors impact SENCO experiences of interprofessional group supervision?*

*RQ 2.1 - What features, processes and/or mechanisms of interprofessional group supervision did SENCOs particularly value or identify as impactful to their experience of supervision?*

Survey question: What do you feel has made supervision effective and valuable?

SENCOs gave a range of responses identifying factors that influenced the efficacy and value of supervision for them. Key language that came up was that of 'opportunity' and 'time' to reflect, discuss and share with other SENCOs.

Other key points made referred to the value of the EP supervisor role: *'[The EP] is very good at asking pertinent questions which make us see things from a different angle.*

*Perspective.'* This interprofessional perspective and positioning of EP supervisors was identified as valuable, beyond the group experience of supervision with other SENCOs:

*'We regularly meet as SENCOs [as part of a local SENCO partnership] but it is so helpful*

*to have the opinion of someone who is not bogged down in the system and so can see things more objectively than we sometimes can.'* Again, SENCOs highlighted the value of supervision in helping them feel less alone and recognise the shared challenges for SENCOs in the current climate: *'This has been a difficult year and it was helpful sometimes just to be reassured that others were finding it as difficult as I was!'*

Survey question: Do you feel the group dynamic impacted your experience of group supervision?

62.5% of SENCO survey respondents ( $N = 10$ ) answered identified that the group dynamic impacted their experience, and the remaining 6 SENCOs (37.5%) reported that it did not. Qualitative responses to the optional open-answer follow-up question highlighted perceptions of both positive and negative impact by group dynamic.

Positive dynamics identified included sense of safety within the group: *'As a group, we really gel and get on, which makes for an atmosphere of safety and confidence.'*

SENCOs also reported a shared valuation of supervision and other group members, such that *'everyone had a similar outlook and approach to the supervision'* and *'everyone wants to be there and everyone is valued. Everyone's time is no more or less precious.'*

Balancing voices within the group was identified as a potential barrier to the positive experiences described above: *'The first few sessions were dominated by two more vocal SENCO's, who also knew our lead EP, which made it difficult to contribute.'*

*However, this soon improved as the group found it's rhythm and everyone's views were valued.'*

In addition to balancing group contributions, the group size was identified as a relevant factor. Although an intimate group was reported as helpful (*'small groups allows us all time to be heard and gives us a sense of friendship within our shared roles'*), it was recognised that *'on occasion there was only one other school, myself and the Education Psychologist [when it] would be better with more attendees.'*

Familiarity through external networking was noted by several SENCOs who demonstrated examples of this supporting a positive group dynamic: *'We are SENCOs who know each other via our partnership meetings so we are all comfortable with each other already. This has helped us to all feel confident about bringing up issues to the group.'*

However, one SENCO appeared to provide a disconfirming case for this experience and reported feeling outside of existing SENCO networks: *'I found it difficult to participate fully as I felt a bit like an outsider in a group that had prior connection I wasn't part of.'* This SENCO attributed this as a personal rather than group factor: *'This was no one's fault, however and is a failing on my part rather than anyone in the group.'*

### *SENCO confidence in supervision*

Survey question: How confident did you feel to participate in your supervision sessions?



**Table 5***Level of confidence to participate reported by SENCos*

Response selected	Frequency	% of respondents
Extremely confident	4	25
Confident	11	68.75
Neutral	0	0
Not confident	1	6.25
Extremely not confident	0	0

Table 5 shows that over 90% of SENCos reported feeling either confident or extremely confident to participate in the supervision sessions, with one SENCo reporting they felt 'not confident.' As above, this SENCo shared their experience of the group dynamic and lacking confidence personally: *'It felt as if the group all knew each other well before I joined, so despite them being very welcoming I didn't feel very confident to join in discussions.'*

*RQ2.2 - What external factors (such as within their school system) did SENCos identify as facilitators or barriers to their experience of interprofessional group supervision?*

Survey question: How many sessions were you able to attend?

**Table 6***Reported attendance of supervision sessions*

Number of sessions attended	Frequency	% of respondents
1	1	6.25
2	4	25
3	3	18.75
4	1	6.25
5	4	25

Table 6 demonstrates a range of attendance across the 5 available sessions, with only 25% of SENCoS reporting attendance of all sessions.

Survey question: If you have struggled with attending this year, what were the contributing factors for this?

The most frequently reported attendance barriers for SENCoS were their professional workload and other responsibilities in school, such as *'having to take on headteacher duties and safeguarding issues.'* One SENCo highlighted how *'lack of understanding of supervision'* among colleagues has meant their supervision time *'does not feel protected or understood, which means you are constantly given something to deal with during the time you are due to meet.'*

Survey question: Is there anything you would change about your supervision experience and why?

Qualitative SENCo responses highlighted positive experiences of interprofessional group as something they look forward to and some reported having recommended to other SENCoS, so would not change:

- *'It's something I looked forward to each term as a safe and supportive place to discuss the role'*

- *'I would not change anything [...] I see them as being time for me in my role, spending time with others who really understand the job that I do.'*

The one factor that was identified by a SENCo as requiring change was difficulties with consistent group attendance: *'For the last 2 years I have had sessions not go ahead due to the lack of attendees in the group. This is frustrating when I have blocked out time for the meeting.'* This SENCo advocated for *'there to be commitment shown by the group'* to attend consistently.

### 6.2.2 Summary of Phase 1 findings

The survey data demonstrates positive experiences and value from interprofessional group supervision reported by SENCos. The descriptive data provides a snapshot of SENCo views regarding the benefits of supervision to them and hints at the wider impact in schools, for example with the majority of SENCos reporting application of learning in school or plans to do so in the future. Qualitative responses offer insight into the conceptualisations around supervision providing a safe and protected space for reflection and suggest there are individually varying experiences of factors like group dynamic. These findings serve to inform the development of interview questions and identify emerging narratives among SENCos to be further analysed during in-depth interviews for thematic analysis, to bring together the most salient points across SENCo experiences and perceptions.

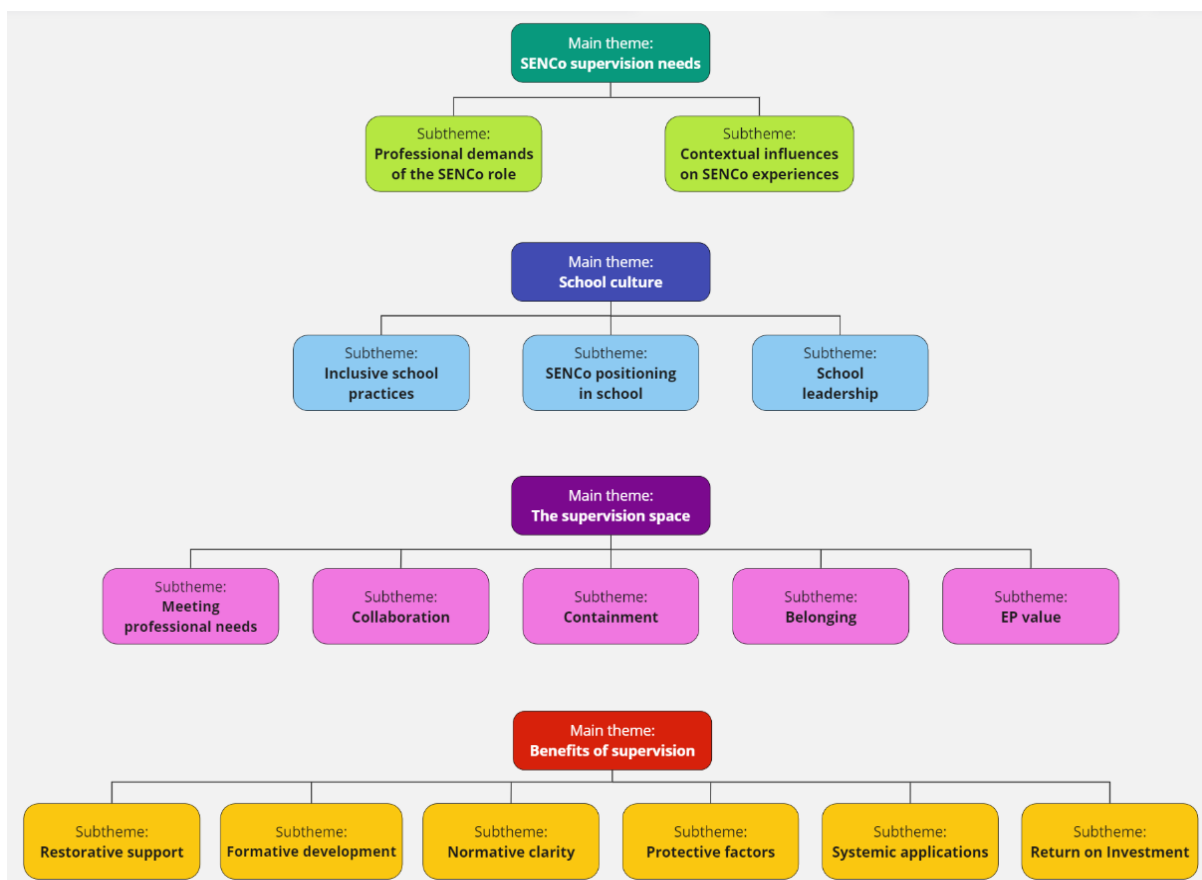
## Phase 2: Thematic Analysis of data from semi-structured SENCo interviews

### Overview

Findings from thematic analysis of semi-structured interview data are presented below, capturing the perspectives of 7 SENCoS who participated in interviews discussing their experience of EP-led SENCo group supervision. The researcher identified 4 key themes that emerged from the data: SENCo supervision needs; school culture; the supervision space; and benefits of supervision (see Figure 12 for the full thematic map.)

**Figure 12**

### Full thematic map

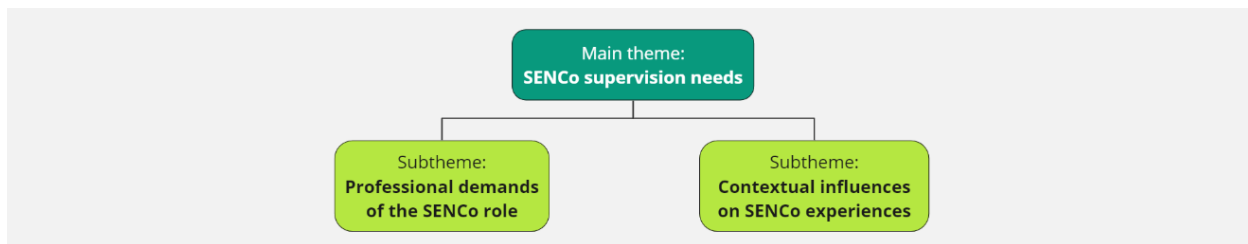


### 6.3.1 Theme 1: SENCo supervision needs

Theme 1 reflects the strong narrative that emerged across interview participants around SENCos feeling there is a need for professional supervision in their role. The reasoning behind this appeared to converge across 2 subordinate themes: the professional demands of the SENCo role and contextual influences on SENCo experiences. I.e., there is a need for professional supervision for SENCos given the extensive demands expected as part of their role, and the external, contextual factors that typically exist around SENCos, which present additional challenges to their experience and ability to meet those demands.

#### **Figure 13**

*Thematic map for SENCo supervision needs*



#### *6.3.1.1 Sub theme 1: Professional demands of the SENCo role*

This subtheme recognises the multifaceted SENCo role and significance of those responsibilities within a school system. Responses highlighted that the titular role of SENCos (to coordinate family and professional involvement, provision and support to identify and meet the special educational needs of children attending their school) was considerable given the high level of ubiquitous need: '*There's so many students with*

*SEN, there's so many EHCP students across the county but across the UK as well.. we've got over 32% with SEN' (ppt1).* SENCoS also shared examples of growing responsibilities across CYP groups subsumed within the SENCo role over time: *'My role has expanded. So, it takes into account all of the aspects of inclusion, such as attendance, pupil premium children, EAL. All of those sorts of things' (ppt2).* Beyond individual CYP numbers representing daily work priorities, SENCoS clarified the longer-term scope of their roles with broader school inclusion practice and policy, which *'starts at the strategic level and right the way down to the operational' (ppt7).*

Overall, this subtheme highlights SENCoS' experience that the role is *'huge,'* presenting significant and extensive professional demands within the baseline expectations on any SENCo.

#### *6.3.1.2 Sub theme 2: Contextual influences on SENCo experiences*

Beyond the SENCo-specific demands highlighted above, this subtheme clarifies the myriad contextual challenges SENCoS typically face on top of the SENCo job description. SENCoS explained how these contextual influences shape their professional experience and further emphasise their need for supervision opportunities.

One SENCo reported working as SENCo across two school settings and many SENCoS reported holding multiple other roles in school which brought additional responsibilities and time commitments, making it difficult to perform the core aspects of the SENCo role. Of the 7 SENCoS interviewed, all held at least one other role in school alongside SENCo – including class teacher, subject department lead, leadership positions e.g.,

Deputy head, Designated Safeguarding Lead, and some also line managed a team of colleagues e.g., teaching assistants and/or resource base staff.

Working patterns were also reported as a factor impacting SENCOs' experiences in performing their role, namely in limiting the time available:

*I work 4 days. I mean, that's not to say that I'm part time, I probably do what's described as 'squeezed working', or something like that, so there isn't somebody who then picks up the 20 percent of this week that I don't work for. (ppt7)*

SENCOs also shared examples of the interaction between their allocated work patterns and the realities of performing their respective roles in school making it difficult to maintain boundaries about how and when their SENCO time is spent, for example:

*I normally have non-contact time all day Friday and that's kind of combined PPA SENCO deputy head time. Obviously as SENCO I'm out at different times of the year doing annual reviews or observations or attending other meetings so that's kind of as and when needed.. It's been slightly more challenging this year because of staffing issues in my classes, which means I haven't been able to have any non-contact time. So, it's trying to juggle and has been quite challenging. (ppt4)*

SENCOs also shared how these contextual factors and additional demands around the SENCO role make it challenging to access things like supervision: *'The biggest barrier to entry to the supervision is if the supervision day isn't your SENCO day, you can't get released from teaching or your other roles. (ppt6)* Though one SENCO shared how their working patterns had been a barrier to continuing SENCO supervision groups despite

being *'certainly still keen to keep going'*, which prompted them to adjust their use of traded EP time to still access supervision opportunities: *'A different EP is assigned to our school and I've used some of her time to have my own supervision, but that will be one-to-one, so I don't quite know how that will work out.'* **(ppt2)**

Linked to their varying responsibilities and working patterns, the majority of SENCOs shared their experience of working reactively to meet the everyday and often spontaneous demands of the role around supporting individual CYP. The language of *'firefighting'* arose frequently across participants to describe this. The reactive nature of work in this context reportedly influences SENCOs' ability to perform other (particularly the strategic) aspects of their role, for example:

*over the last 6 months we've had 2 very high-profile cases which have basically consumed most of my time. [...] So, in terms of my workload there's still ongoing things. But being able to be strategic, I wasn't able to be, because it was so reactionary in terms of what was happening day to day.* **(ppt7)**

This was also linked to broader points around availability of other staff to support in the work:

*Because there's no one else to do all the stuff, you end up not just doing the coordinating - and I would say that the smallest part of my job is the coordinating - actually, all of my job is the firefighting.* **(ppt3)**

This links to another frequently occurring code which identified SENCOs' experience of the role as *'lonely,'* being *'the only person in your school completing that role'* **(ppt7)** and in some cases feeling like *'quite a lone voice'* **(ppt1)** within their school system.



This was related to the perception that colleagues perhaps don't share an understanding of what the role entails. One SENCo highlighted how this can also lead to concerns around becoming '*a little bit blinkered*' (ppt2) in thinking and practice, particularly when they '*work for a long time in the same school,*' presenting this as further reason for SENCos needing supervision and opportunities to connect with other SENCos.

Alongside loneliness, the coding process highlighted common experiences of overwhelm among SENCos. This was partly linked to the '*pressure*' and weight of responsibility felt towards CYP in supporting positive outcomes as '*the advocate for special needs children*' in school. This experience also appeared particularly compounded by the perception of sensitive information and responsibilities sitting solely on SENCo shoulders: '*It can be really difficult. People tell you things and you process things that nobody else in the school perhaps knows.*' (ppt7) This means '*you can easily be swamped and drowning...It's been times where it's all too much, because everything comes to me.*' (ppt1)

This reported experience of overwhelm and sense of individual responsibility was also linked to another contextual factor influencing SENCos' experience in the role - awareness of high burnout and attrition within the profession: '*I'm part of so many Facebook Forums of SENCos, and SENCos are constantly walking away from the job because it's so demoralizing at times.*' (ppt1)

SENCos recognised that supervision is a necessary and standard part of practice in many vocational roles for professionals supporting CYP, adjacent to school systems, but not typical within schools:

*If we were in a social worker role [or] Early Help worker role, we would have that supervision. [...] As a teaching profession or as support staff within the teaching profession, we don't have supervision in an official way. (ppt7)*

One SENCo recognised a lack of and need for supervision opportunities introduced to the SENCo profession through training to build understanding:

*It would be beneficial if it were part of the training programme that you had some supervision, even if it's just to help you realise how important it is to communicate with those professional, knowledgeable others. So that might be an addition to consider is, you know the SENCo award, having [SENCo group supervision] [...] to get people to be aware that it's there and that it's important and that it's helpful. (ppt6)*

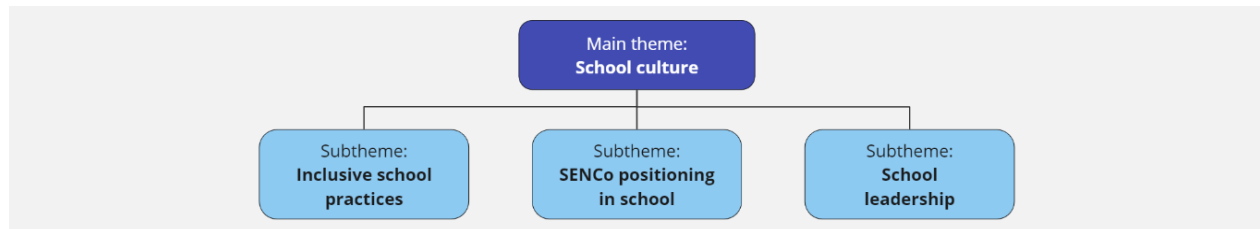
Overall, these contextual challenges experienced by SENCos in schools converge with the considerable demands of the SENCo role itself identified in subtheme 1, highlighting a recognised need for SENCo professional supervision.

### 6.3.2 Theme 2: School culture

This theme highlights the role of school culture in shaping SENCos' daily experience in the school microsystem, i.e., their professional experiences outside of the supervision group space. The subordinate themes underpinning school culture were identified as Inclusive school practices; SENCo positioning in school; and School leadership.

**Figure 14**

*Thematic map for School culture*



### *6.3.2.1 Sub theme 1: Inclusive school practices*

This subtheme refers to the experience of inclusion across the school microsystem, including the school's approach to and understanding of inclusion for CYP with SEND and more broadly amongst staff.

SENCoS highlighted that *'SEND is something that's so important that everyone needs to understand and have really good clarity around. It's got to be at the heart of what we do at every school.'* (ppt1) This was evident in examples shared by some SENCoS who recognised a robust understanding of inclusive principles in their school, facilitating not only their role as SENCo but the focus of whole school policies and staff awareness, for example:

*[Inclusion] wouldn't just involve the SEN children, that would be our looked after children, [...] our children with a plan, a child in need plan on the safeguarding register, those children who maybe don't fit into either of those criteria but are of concern to us in terms of their family life or their presentation in school. There's not, you know they are the ones that we're thinking about all the time, and then we work outwards from there.* (ppt7)

SENCOs also spoke about the culture of working collaboratively with colleagues towards school goals. In contrast to the SENCOs who identified feeling overwhelmed and lonely with the perception of shouldering things alone, some SENCOs shared examples of positive systemic practice and conscious structuring of staff teams. They valued a school culture in which knowledge and workload is shared so they do not feel individually responsible for all aspects of SENCO work. For example:

*Mental health kind of falls under my umbrella, but we also have an ELSA in school so we work together quite closely on that and we also try to train up another kind of lead member of support staff in key stage one because our ELSA is in key stage two, so we try to spread out the little pockets of knowledge around a little bit so it doesn't all just sit with me. (ppt4)*

One SENCO described feeling 'very lucky' that working with their colleagues was 'really easy', highlighting that they felt 'we're on the team together and everyone knows that.' (ppt6)

Relatedly, SENCOs shared insights about the impact of having an existing culture and understanding of supervision in the school. For one SENCOs, this was a familiar and deliberate practice within school:

*It's a culture in our school, anyway, to practice supervision, as a group. So that's why we are set up as phases, so that we work together in those groups to pick apart any of our issues. [...] Our DSLs, we all get together as a group as well. So we've all experienced our own levels of supervision in our different*

*responsibilities, so we've sort of come together and said this is how we want the culture in our school to be. (ppt2)*

Other SENCOs identified a lack of understanding about supervision: *'I think people quite often think of supervision as almost like a bad thing sometimes? I think people sometimes believe like 'oh what have you done wrong to have supervision.'* So it's *viewed quite negatively.'* (ppt1) Participants shared how this understanding of supervision amongst staff shapes their experience of seeking supervision opportunities within their school and of accessing the EP-led SENCO supervision group.

This subtheme highlights the importance of a school's sense of inclusivity and understanding towards CYP and between staff as a factor influencing SENCOs' experiences.

#### *6.3.2.2 Sub theme 2: SENCO positioning in school*

SENCOs shared their perceptions of how their positioning within school influences their professional experience.

Interview data showed differing individual views about SENCO positioning within the school's SLT and its reflection of school culture, based on personal experience. It was recognised that *'some SENCOs do feel that they need to be part of the leadership team, in order to be able to kind of have the muscle to be able to get done what they want to get done.'* (ppt3) Indeed, some highlighted the importance of implementation as *'to really have an inclusive environment, you have to be in a strategic lead role to be able to sort of embed that. (ppt1)* Positioning SENCOs within SLT was seen as a way of *'raising that profile of SEND with all staff' (ppt4)* and facilitating the SENCO's strategic

role in school: *'[SENCo] is an SLT role, and that is quite important for us as a school, because as a strategic outlook, we try and start with our most vulnerable learners first.*

**(ppt7)**

In contrast, a minority of SENCos felt that their position on SLT was not necessary. In these instances, the SENCos felt well connected to senior staff and involved in decision making regardless: *'the executive head teacher is my line manager, so we have conversations all the time. People ask my advice and I'm always consulted before things are put in place.'* **(ppt3)** One SENCo highlighted the additional time commitment of SLT meetings and explained that although they are not positioned within SLT, they are invited to SLT meetings when deemed relevant for SENCo input, with trust in the head to make these calls: *'thankfully because my head teacher was formerly the SENCo, she fully understands which of those aspects and how to separate out the operational from the strategic, so I don't feel like my voice isn't heard in terms of strategic inputs.'* **(ppt6)**

Autonomy was also considered to be an important aspect of how SENCos experience their positioning within school and the level of independence afforded to them to perform their role and make decisions regarding external opportunities like attending group supervision: *'There's a lot of trust placed in me that I'm managing my diary [...] I don't really have to answer for that... I don't have to check with anyone whether I can do supervision.'* **(ppt3)** In contrast, it was reported that *'the newer SENCos we've got in the partnership now maybe don't have that support and that voice to be able to say 'no this is important, I'm doing it.''* **(ppt4)**

### 6.3.2.3 Sub theme 3: School leadership

Interviews highlighted an emerging narrative around the role of SLT in school culture.

SENCoS recognised that a shared understanding and recognition of professional needs from SLT was key to their daily work and engagement with SENCo group supervision.

SENCoS explained that *'I don't think the SENCo role is always very well understood by leaders within schools.'* (ppt1) The only exceptions to this were reported in cases where an SLT colleague had themselves held the SENCo role: *'Luckily, our new executive head was a SENCo for a year because her SENCo was on leave. [...] so she does have some understanding of it.'* (ppt3)

Similarly, it was felt that understanding of supervision within SLT was important for SENCoS to feel supported to attend SENCo supervision groups: *'The fact that the head teacher views it as an important thing to do meant that I was going to do it.'* (ppt2) This SLT awareness and support was not experienced by all SENCoS, who felt *'there is such a lack of understanding, I think personally, from wider leadership teams about the importance of that space and the importance that's it's protected.'* This reportedly significantly impacted individual SENCo experiences, for example when ultimately prevented from attending by SLT prioritising other demands: *'I remember bursting into tears at the end of the day, because I was so upset that the other members of SLT couldn't understand the importance of the supervision.'* (ppt1)

This linked to recognition of SENCo priorities and supervision as a professional need by SLT. For one SENCo, this involved proactive planning on the part of the headteacher, (who had formerly been the SENCo):

*It was fortunate for me that most of our supervisions fell on the day that happens to be my SENCo day, not by kismet, but because [the headteacher] had set my SENCo day to be the day she knew supervision was on. (ppt6)*

It was felt that SLT support for SENCo boundaries and protected time was important to model whole-school culture of respecting professional needs, such as the commitment to attend a SENCo group supervision session over, e.g., staff cover. This meant some SENCos felt confident that *'people know that's my time. It's blocked out.'* (ppt6) It was recognised that, although important for SENCos to feel confident in *'giving yourself permission to attend the meetings and prioritise that,'* it was felt that *'particularly as a teacher or a SENCo it's hard to give yourself that space,'* (ppt4) which is why SLT support is so impactful.

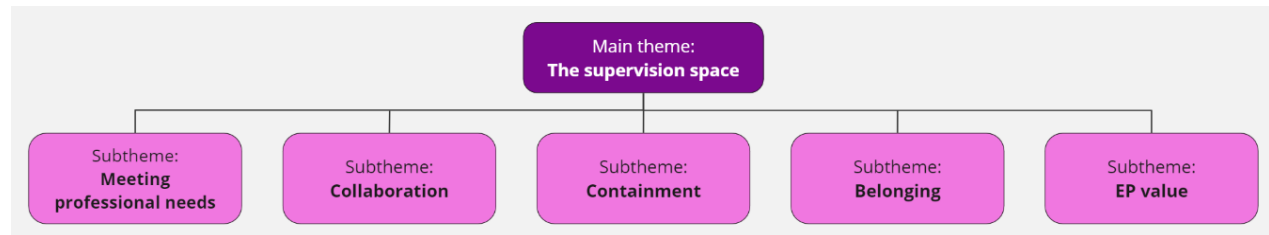
### 6.3.3 Theme 3: The supervision space

This theme brings together interview data around the experience of SENCos within the supervision group. It describes the impactful qualities and features that SENCos felt they created and received within the sessions and the metaphorical supervision space.



**Figure 15**

*Thematic map for SENCo supervision needs*



### 6.3.3.1 Sub theme 1: Meeting professional needs

The coding process identified commonalities in the descriptions of SENCos around supervision offering protected time in which to pause and reflect on the SENCo role, consider longer-term strategic goals, and to feel recognition of these as professional needs to be prioritised in the sessions without external distraction.

Interview data highlighted a shared view among SENCos that *'supervision should be a protected space and a protected time.'* (ppt1) This was felt to be a crucial aspect of supervision in meeting professional needs of busy SENCos who valued *'knowing that there was that time set aside, because otherwise it doesn't happen.'* (ppt2)

This notion of protected time was identified as important in facilitating the 'bigger picture' scope of the SENCo role to make changes to support inclusion across their school system. *'Unless you give yourself time to step away and properly planned for that strategic role, nothing ever moves on in a bigger, idealistic, research-based way.'* (ppt7)

The opportunity to pause and reflect in the supervision space was identified as an opportunity seldom experienced in school systems:

*As a group we said that a lot actually, that you very rarely, just as the class teacher, but let alone SENCo are given permission to have time to stop and think and to talk about something with other people. We're just constantly day-to-day, thing-to-thing [...] and actually, to just stop and have time to reflect is really powerful. (ppt4)*

The experiences shared by SENCos reflected a shared valuation and prioritisation of supervision as a professional need, '*recognizing that time and space and discussion are an important aspect of reflecting on your role,*' (ppt7) which was understood by the group members: '*I think we would all fight for that time [...] if I was asked to do something else, I say 'no, I'm really sorry, but I've got a meeting and that meeting takes priority.'*' (ppt3)

#### 6.3.3.2 Sub theme 2: Belonging

The concept of belonging emerged from SENCo narratives around joining together with other SENCos with shared experience. SENCos described feeling like they were not alone and, instead, part of a SENCo peer group and community that had been created from the supervision space.

Interview data demonstrated the importance of SENCo group supervision providing a space in which SENCos could recognise shared experience with others, helping to gain clarity, perspective, reassurance and feeling of being understood by others:

*I have one [SENCo] network meeting once every long term with my [school] trust. And other than that, I don't get to see other SENCos. [...] You're on your own doing that role. So it's being with other people who are trying to juggle all of those*

*balls as well. That when I'm saying about the things I'm struggling with, they really do understand. (ppt5)*

SENCOs reported that this shared experience gave insight into common challenges across other school systems: *'it's so valuable sitting and meeting other SENCOs and realizing actually the issues I'm having are the same issues that you're having.'* (ppt3)

The language of *'knowing that you're not alone'* in the supervision space was a common thread across SENCO interviews, linked to the shared experience of otherwise feeling alone within their school system:

*We are islands in the schools that we work at, we are islands. So those supervision meetings, I see it as all of us get together and in our individual islands and we're creating a bigger island just for that couple of hours. (ppt3)*

As such, the supervision space was described as *'very beneficial even just in terms of having a sense of community with my peers'* (ppt6) in which SENCOs reported that *'we all kind of see each other as our SENCO buddies and I think that's really important. (ppt3)* SENCOs felt the supervision group space enabled *'like-minded people coming together who totally understand where you're coming from'* when that is not always experienced in school.

In convergence with survey findings, interview coding identified familiarity and existing professional networks among the supervision group as supportive in establishing that sense of belonging for many SENCOs: *'I think it helps that all of the SENCOs know each other, and we know each other quite well because we meet 6 times a year anyway as part of the partnership meetings.'* (ppt3) Interview data indicated that more in-depth

disconfirming analysis of this point from the survey findings (i.e., possible difficulty engaging with an already-established SENCo peer group) was not possible suggesting this survey participant did not continue participation to interview.

Overall, the codes and data within this subtheme highlight the value of sharing in a collective experience and identity, for SENCos to know they are not alone despite typically operating as 'islands' within their school system.

#### *6.3.3.3 Sub theme 3: Containment*

This subtheme brings together the narrative of SENCos' experiencing a safe, containing space as part of a supervision group, in which they feel supported, validated, reassured and heard without judgment.

This supportive dynamic was felt to foster a *'feeling that whatever you bring, you're not going to be judged and that there will be people there that can help you.'* (ppt3) This meant that SENCos felt they had built safe relationships that could also operate outside of the supervision space, and confident to *'call on those people'* (ppt7) when needed.

This lack of judgement was seen to translate into the group supervision process, supported by the supervision structure which facilitated constructive interactions with group members: *'if we were veering off, we'd say, you know [SENCo name] let's get back on track, which was really nice. I really enjoyed that structure and that knowing that we could challenge each other in that safe way.'* (ppt4)

One SENCo highlighted the role of safety and relationships in being able to make best use of opportunities for reflection, both within and outside of the supervision space:

*We're in that supervision, it's a safe space, we're not at crisis point, although there may have been crisis points during the day, and we're able to reflect on things. [...] It means if you are having a problem or a crisis in terms of children that you're working with and you're drawing on a SENCo, you can call them up, and that relationship's there. (ppt7)*

It was felt that the SENCo supervision group space offered reassurance as *'it was helpful to have other people's, views, and confirmation, even if sometimes it was just a confirmation that my approach was a good one.'* (ppt2) This was particularly salient for a less experienced SENCo who described the supervision group sessions as *'very much for me, being relatively new SENCo, the reassurance that I wasn't completely bonkers and that I was going down the right path with my thinking.'* (ppt6) Though this reassurance to *'know that I'm not doing a bad job'*, (ppt1) was shared across SENCos of different levels of experience and valued alongside feeling appreciation from *'knowing you're doing a good job.'*

Alongside reassurance and appreciation, SENCos reported experiencing validation of feelings and acknowledgement of the demands on SENCos, all contributing to feelings of containment:

*We had one session where someone just said 'I'm done. I'm feeling like I can't do this anymore.' And you know, there was a phenomenal outpouring of support. And at the end of it, everyone was like, 'you need to do what's right for you but know that if you left, you'd be missed by so many people and the impact you make would be'. And it was really meaningful and a moving session to see [...] it*

*was OK to say 'I'm not OK' in in that instance and that was very supported. I think it's very valuable for that kind of thing. (ppt6)*

It was recognised that much of SENCo work *'is dedicated to the well-being of others, making sure you know the pupils are being well looked after, the staff'* etc., so it is important for SENCos to experience a space for them to be looked after. One SENCo highlighted the salience of challenges being acknowledged by the EP supervisor within the supervision space:

*'to have [the EP] just sit and say that, who is objective, [...] to just give the acknowledgement that yes, it is really hard is helpful. And obviously it doesn't help with my To Do List but it is really helpful just that acknowledgement. (ppt3)*

This subtheme recognises the containing experiences shared by SENCos within the supervision space, through interactions with other SENCos and the EP supervisor to feel supported in a safe, non-judgemental environment which offers reassurance, validation and appreciation.

#### *6.3.3.4 Sub theme 4: Collaboration*

Interview codes and data indicate collaboration is a common thread within many SENCos' experiences of the supervision space as one for joint reflection and contribution, having co-constructed a supervision format as a group working towards shared and purposeful aims.

SENCos felt it was *'very useful to encourage people as much as possible to work as partnerships, and I think we can be stronger that way.'* (ppt2) It was recognised that

*'although it was being run by the EP, it was quite collegiate, so everybody inputted with each other and answered the questions as a group'* (ppt6) working and thinking collaboratively.

Interview data indicates that SENCOs experienced different models of supervision and formats within their respective groups, with personal preferences varying as to the level of prescribed structure to the session that was appreciated. For example, one SENCO reported:

*I do like a really clear structure for it. I like a meeting with an agenda, I like a clear outcome. And I think just knowing where it's going to. [...] It doesn't have to be the 'solution circle', but something where it's a description and analysis and a reflection, and how things can change, that's really interesting and useful.* (ppt7)

In contrast, another SENCO described the experience in their group where *'we all said that the free flow discussion was much more helpful to us because really we're in a room with people who know what they're talking about.'* (ppt3) The underlying code which links these different experiences is the collaborative process of group negotiation to identify and develop a process that meets the needs and preferences of the group members.

As with session structure, SENCOs valued working collaboratively to agree joint aims and actions (with and for each other) *'for [supervision] to be purposeful.'* (ppt2) This purposeful collaboration was felt to focus on individuals reflecting together rather than being presented with ready-made solutions. It was recognised that *'there'll be time for us to not give solutions to things, but to talk together about possible avenues to explore*

*and then at the end the person would come away with a few actions that they could try.'*

**(ppt4)**

It was felt that the collaborative dynamic of joint working and reflection towards purposeful shared goals represented a key aspect of the group supervision space for SENCoS, who experienced collective agency to construct and adapt a supervision process to work for the specific group.

#### *6.3.3.5 Sub theme 5: EP value*

Interview analysis highlighted the perception of EP value in bringing to the supervision space a different professional perspective, facilitatory role, and skill in the practice of supervision. This added value of EP supervisor was felt to augment the supervision space beyond the experience of SENCoS coming together as a homogenous professional group.

SENCoS identified that the supervision space *'being led by another professional has been really valuable, who's not a SENCo but is aware of the SENCo role and works within that same system.'* **(ppt4)** It was felt that the EP's position outside the school system afforded them a rational stance to contribute when the SENCo group could be prompted by *'that wise person, being objective, being a devil's advocate, and saying 'hang on a minute have you thought about doing it this way,' which is what the supervision groups bring us.'* **(ppt3)**

This supported the perception of EP as facilitator and curious observer, *'sometimes just being that impartial person as well and just asking those 'what if?' questions or 'why is it like that?' (ppt4)* to prompt further reflection. *'It was being sort of moderated by the EP*



*and not run by the EP, there was information sharing across all of us.'* **(ppt6)** This was recognised as important to SENCOs who felt *'very much the solutions or the ideas came from us and [the EP] was very clever about pulling them out of us.'* **(ppt2)** SENCOs identified EPs' supervision skills in *'keeping us focused on the subject, making us think in a wider way, asking some key questions to drill down into what the issues were.'* **(ppt7)** This was noted as an important part of the reflective supervision process as SENCOs felt *'the EP does really well to kind of stop it just becoming a moan fest, able to pull it back a little bit [...] by asking a really pertinent question that kind of stops us all in our tracks'* which helps to *'move the conversation slightly'*. **(ppt3)**

Overall, the codes and data underpinning this subtheme indicated that SENCOs valued the contribution of the EP supervisor to the space and recognised positive impact from the EP's different professional perspective, curious questioning and skills in facilitation and supervisory practice.

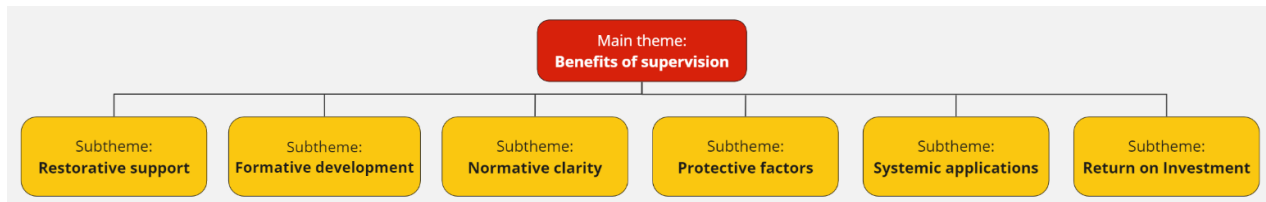
#### 6.3.4 Theme 4: Benefits of supervision

This study aimed to explore the perceived impact of SENCO group supervision to SENCOs and their surrounding systems, in terms of professional wellbeing, practice and understanding. This theme brings together the relevant findings from interview data which captured a strong and consistent emphasis across SENCOs about the benefit of interprofessional group supervision. The identified subthemes reflect the range of benefits experienced by SENCOs, who perceived positive impact from restorative support; formative development; normative clarity; protective factors; systemic

applications of learning from supervision; and the return on an original investment of time in supervision.

**Figure 16**

*Thematic map for the Benefits of supervision*



#### 6.3.4.1 Sub theme 1: Restorative support

SENCo group supervision was seen to offer a space to be *'able to leave some things.. and not take it home.'* For example, when *'I did present things in the meetings, actually, I felt like that was done then, or I had actions to follow through from so then I wasn't taking that home and wasn't sat worrying about it all the time.'* (ppt4)

Beyond offloading, SENCos identified the restorative value of supervision as *'something I found really helpful over the years to manage my own mental health and the impact of the work on myself.'* (ppt1) Group supervision sessions were felt to be important in *'recognising the impact of stress of your role as well. That's absolutely the thing that's most useful for me about going to them.'* (ppt5)

During coding, the language of 'relief' emerged often, with many SENCos describing prospective relief when it *'gets to some points in the term, but like, 'ah, there's a [SENCo supervision] meeting coming up next week, thank goodness.'* (ppt4) SENCos

described *'I just feel my shoulders just relaxing when I go in'* **(ppt3)** to the session as well as following one.

As part of the restorative support experienced, *'the most important thing for me is the nurture of it, the getting together with other people who know what I'm talking about'* **(ppt3)** and SENCOs feel they have the space to listen and be listened to if they want to share:

*It might not be that I would present a problem to talk about at that time, but I think just being there and listening to others and knowing that I could talk to someone who'd understand. It's not necessarily about solutions either, it's just about kind of sharing and thinking through problems together. Yeah, it was a big help.*

**(ppt4)**

The reduced levels of stress and overwhelm were particularly salient to a newer SENCO who described their experience *'being brand new in role, initially it was like 'what do I do?'. Over time it was much more that supportive and restorative aspect of the sessions that was beneficial.'* **(ppt6)** This highlights the perceived impact of supervision on wellbeing alongside benefits to professional understanding, with some SENCOs specifying *'I think the wellbeing aspect comes above all of those others. I think the other things support that mental well-being, recognizing that time and space and discussion are an important aspect of reflecting on your role.'* **(ppt7)**

SENCOs described a mental health *'boost you get from knowing that you're supported and you're not alone,'* **(ppt6)** highlighting that the restorative impact did not rely on formative outcomes:

*'I found them really beneficial. Not always, necessarily in terms of coming away and thinking I've got an action to follow through, [...] more just feeling like I'd just lifted a bit of weight off my shoulders for a little bit to be honest. And just, yeah, my mental health felt better after those sessions.'* (ppt4)

#### 6.3.4.2 Sub theme 2: Formative development

Interview analysis also highlighted formative development as a key benefit experienced across SENCOs in building knowledge, solving problems, sharing ideas and resources, and improving understanding of professional roles.

SENCOs valued being *'able to pick other people's ideas, and for them to be able to help problem solve with you'* (ppt7) and found it *'really helpful because getting the opinions of others on your big problem.'* (ppt6)

SENCOs were involved in the process of triaging problems for discussion in the session:

*we brought our rocks or boulders depending on how the size of the issue, we shared sort of the main issues, we saw if there were themes, and one person would share that, we would ask questions and then we would sort of look at the solutions.* (ppt5)

This formative development through problem solving was linked back to restorative support as *'the fact that we were getting answers to professional issues I suppose, took some of the stress away.'* (ppt2)

SENCOs identified knowledge growth from procedural insight to broader SENCO work by sharing ideas and resources between SENCOs with a collective wealth of

experience: *'my knowledge has increased in terms of even just some of the standard day-to-day referral type systems of being a SENCo, just some other people saying, 'oh I wasn't aware of that' that could learn through my knowledge.'* (ppt4)

SENcos highlighted that *'coming away with a few ideas to act upon was really helpful because at that point it felt like, you know, just hitting your head against a brick wall, not getting anywhere.'* The experience meant *'actually coming away with these things you thought of together was nice. That was beneficial for me.'* (ppt4)

Some SENcos also identified a shift in their understanding of the more systemic aspects to EP work, having gained insight into application of wider skills in SENCo supervision. This prompted reflection about SENCo commissioning of EP time:

*I think the EP role probably actually, just hearing about some of the work that they have done with other people. [...] We've typically used our EP in probably quite a narrow way and I'm trying to expand that, so it's not about individual children, it's more holistic. [...] Yeah, just hearing that's been quite helpful.* (ppt4)

This was the case for SENcos who have years of experience working with EPs: *I've dealt with EPs for the last seven years as SENCo. But before that, they used to come in and see children in my class and that was really all I thought an EP was for.* (ppt3)

The formative development reported by SENcos through their experience of supervision highlights expanded knowledge, understanding, and reflections on future practice, with examples of shifting thinking towards more systemic, holistic ways of working.

#### 6.3.4.3 Sub theme 3: Normative clarity

Except for one SENCo new to the role, SENCos did not report a change in understanding of the SENCo role from engaging in SENCo group supervision. However, coding of the interview data highlighted examples in which SENCos appear to have gained clarity on the expectations of the SENCo role, or perhaps gained confidence in communicating the boundaries of their role to others in school, which serves a normative purpose in managing the SENCo role delivery and delegating auxiliary tasks. For example, one SENCo realising in supervision *'that's not your role. You are coordinator, not a doer. You need to be sending that to the teacher [...] so I try to explain to staff, you know, it's not my job to make these things for you.'* (ppt3)

SENCos gained opportunities to review SENCo task management and prioritisation of how time is spent, with occasions when a supervision meeting prompts reflection on *'our work loads and what we should be taking on and what we can leave.'* (ppt3)

#### 6.3.4.4 Sub theme 4: Protective factors

Interview coding highlighted some benefits of SENCo group supervision that appeared alongside restorative support and formative development but operated at a more proactive level to impact SENCo experiences going forwards. One SENCo described supervision as *'a protective factor around your professional mental health'* (ppt7) and this protective effect appeared to cover SENCos' sense of competence, confidence and resilience, with identification of available support networks too.

SENCos felt their experience of supervision has *'helped me from a self-esteem point of view, it's helped me to realize that I have quite a lot of knowledge and advice that I can*

*pass on to other people.'* **(ppt3)** This realisation of having knowledge to share with others was felt to highlight individual competence:

*That does help me to sit and think 'actually I do know what I'm doing or what I'm talking about' cause sometimes you kind of sit and you think, 'Oh my goodness me, I don't know what I'm doing,' but actually I do. And I think the groups have helped with that as well.* **(ppt3)**

This conscious competence helped to build confidence as SENCOs described feeling *'better at managing some of those problems that I was coming across rather than just feeling like I was sinking so much, that actually I could tackle that problem and just thinking through it myself.'* **(ppt4)**

This *'confidence to do the job'* brings with it *'confidence to stick with the job,'* **(ppt6)** building SENCOs' sense of resilience to keep going in their role, based on awareness of their skillset and the support available to them through group supervision: *'It was something that kept me going sometimes, knowing that I'd have the opportunity to talk to other people.'* **(ppt4)** One SENCO described how *'actually just having the supervision grounds you,'* explaining the impact it has on your headspace to process and tackle an upcoming demand: *'And then you look at it again, you go actually, 'deep breaths, these are my priorities moving forward.'* **(ppt6)**

SENCOs described use of the supervision group as an evolving network for emotional support as well as advice:

*I know that I contacted the people from the SENCO Supervision group for advice and support, like I'd give them a phone call more than anybody else. There are a*

*couple of SENCos in that group and sometimes we just ring each other and say 'I'm just ringing you up because I just need to chat to you about this child'. But actually what it is, is you just having a well-being check-in shall we call it, a bit of a 'dump the junk' or whatever. (ppt7)*

The protective benefits of SENCo group supervision operate at an individual and group level. They highlight the value to SENCos, for processing of previous and current work and building resilience and skill in tackling future challenges.

#### *6.3.4.5 Sub theme 5: Systemic applications*

This subtheme presents interview data relating to SENCo applications of learning from group supervision to external systems. This includes the application of supervision processes with school staff; use of problem solving and prioritisation tools with CYP; adopting a facilitatory role to support parent and staff problem solving; and offering containment elsewhere in the school system.

SENCos identified having *'loads of examples where I then brought in things that I've got from the supervision'* to implement in their school, such as *'I've taken the supervision way of working and used that in staff meetings as well.'* (ppt5) Ideas have included practical ice breaker or mindful activities as well as more formal structures for joint meetings and are reported to have been well received by staff. One SENCo also shared their application of the problem-sizing analogy (from their supervision group) 'pebble, boulder, rock' with children.

A salient finding, considering the systemic lens of this research, has been examples shared by SENCos taking on a supervisory role with others in their school system, like



parents and colleagues, to facilitate problem solving without offering ready-made solutions. This highlights reflection on the systemic role of the SENCo with recognition that an aspect of the job when coordinating provision and professional support to meet SEN is:

*a bit like an EP, is to think and facilitate those discussions, to give people the confidence to do that job, to understand that what they're doing is right, to maybe get them to reflect on, perhaps training that we've had and direct them down that avenue. (ppt7)*

Another key finding in relation to the social constructionist underpinnings of this research is reflection from SENCos around different individual constructions of experience and the language used to communicate these:

*In terms of language. I think that's probably been the most impactful in terms of how I interact with parents or staff, trying to create questioning and create ideas from within the person you were already working with. So, understanding where they're coming from, trying to ask some of the in-depth questions, trying to pick what their skill set already is, and trying to get them to be solution-focused themselves. I think that's much more powerful in terms of the impact you can have with children if it comes from maybe the team that are working with them. (ppt7)*

This also translates into curiosity and empathy towards others, as SENCos adapt their interactions to apply supervision containment principles in school., e.g., when speaking to parents and teachers. One SENCo described supervision as initiating the

*'expectation that I be nurturing and supportive of others. So yeah, I think it probably has its modelled the appropriate behaviours.'* (ppt6)

*I think certainly one of the aspects which I hadn't appreciated, but I probably have carried across [from supervision]. Is that that sense of being seen, being heard, being not alone? It's crucial. And so when a teacher comes to me frazzled about a particular child. I've learned to go 'I understand where you're coming from and what we need to do is work on what we can do to change that collectively.'* And so I've tried to be more supportive of my colleagues in my role.

(ppt6)

#### 6.3.4.6 Sub theme 6: Return on investment

This subtheme reflects language used by SENCoS to highlight their experience of supervision benefits outweighing the initial demand of time required for sessions.

SENCoS recognised that *'obviously [SENCo group supervision is] a time commitment, but I think the time commitment is mitigated by the improvement in mental health and just confidence to do the job, confidence to stick with the job.'* (ppt6) This is reflected in SENCo valuations: *'I think in terms of time management, I would certainly prioritise it over my other stuff because it just gives you a bit more headroom. You can come out of sharing, knowing that it is manageable and doable.'* (ppt6)

Indeed, it was felt that the ripple effect of SENCo supervision benefits were experienced across the school system. So, despite the supervision session involving one SENCo joining an external group, all those across the SENCo's surrounding systems stand to benefit from this key professional form their school experiencing this kind of supervision.

For one SENCo, this has informed a shared prioritisation in their school: *'in terms of making it non-negotiable, I don't think anybody disagrees that it is beneficial to the school for me to have that supervision.'* (ppt7)

#### 6.3.5 Member checking of findings (Phase 3)

4 of the 7 SENCo interview participants opted-in to the third phase of the research in which member-checking of themes was conducted. These 'advisory' participants were presented with a thematic map and the key findings identified by the researcher discussed.

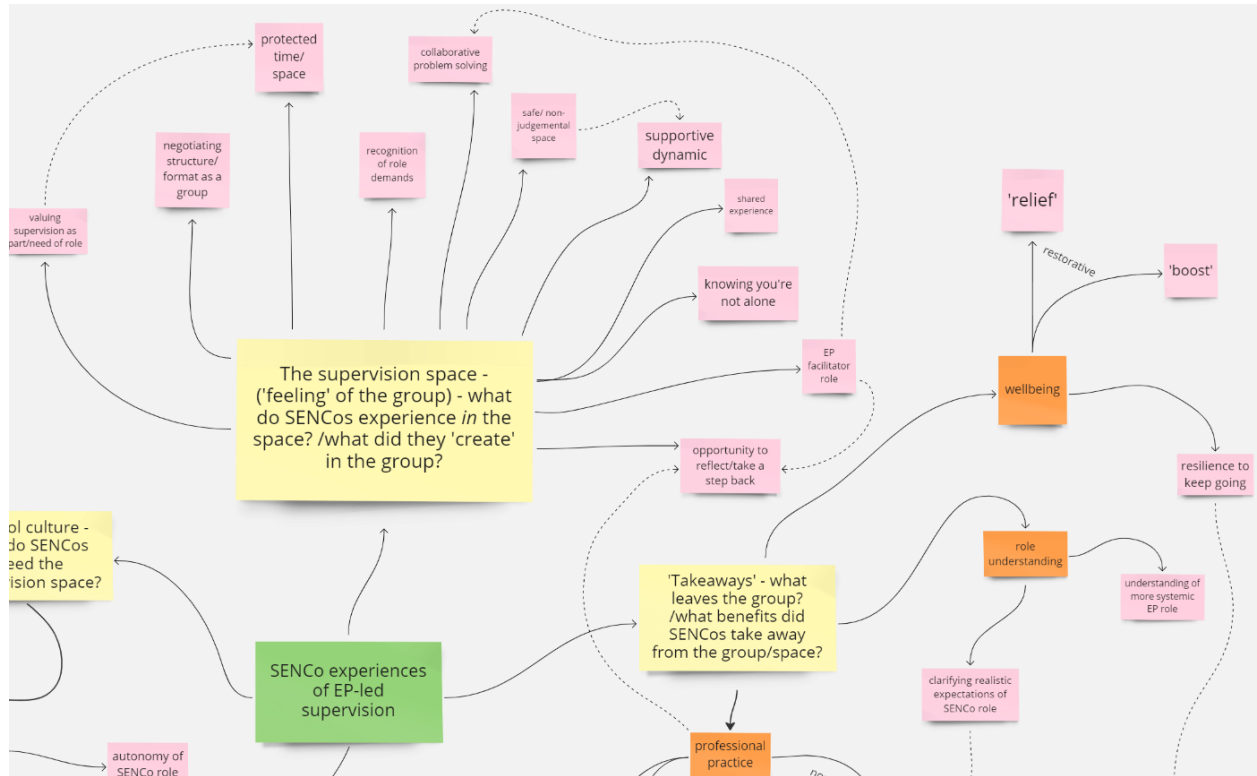
The SENCos were asked:

1. Does this match your experience?
2. Would you want to change anything?
3. Would you want to add anything?

All 4 SENCos reported that the themes presented matched their experience, with feedback such as *'it is my lived experience on a page'* (ppt6). In the first member checking interview, the wellbeing impact of supervision was presented alongside professional development as benefits (see Figure 17 - full-scale maps are included in Appendix G).

Figure 17

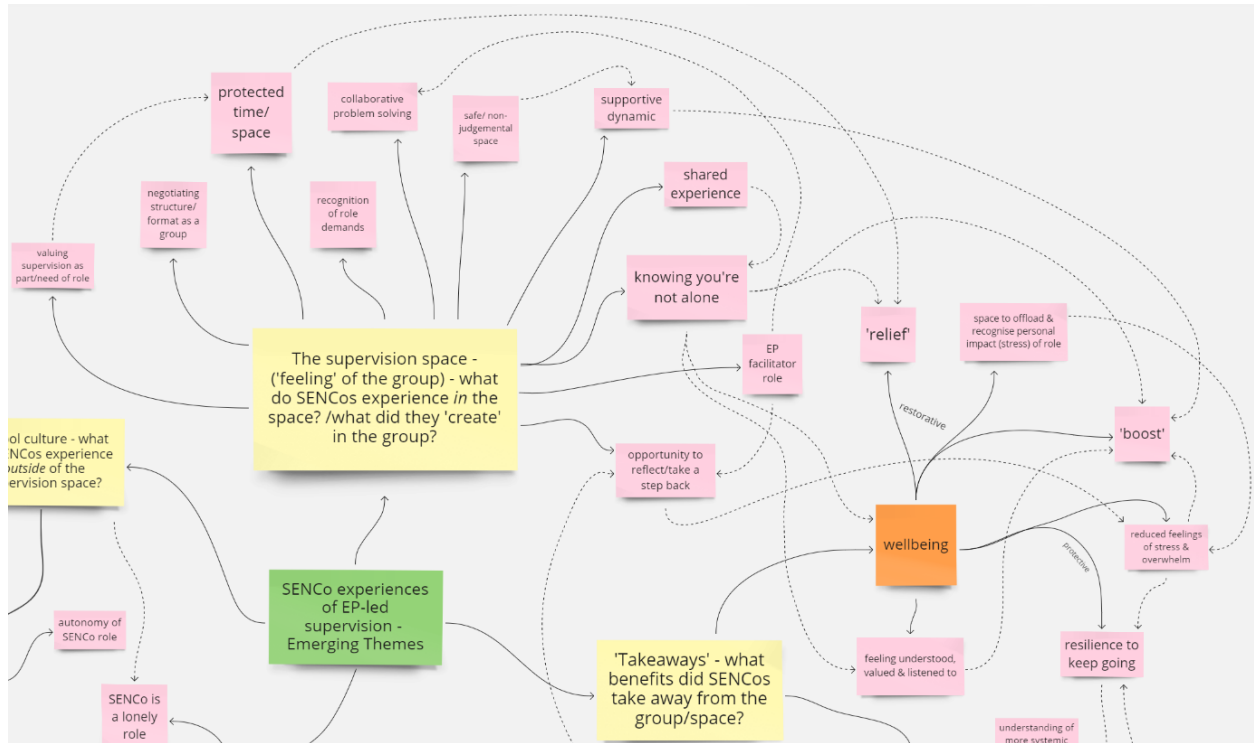
Thematic map presented in initial member-checking interview



The SENCo suggested that although the visual presentation showed the wellbeing impact as important, they described it as 'crucial' and needed stronger emphasis on the map, with clearer links to the associated factors like professional relationships and support network. This prompted further researcher reflection on how to visually present the salience of specific findings within the thematic mapping process. So inter-related factors were depicted with connecting arrows to be more reflective of SENCo narratives around interacting benefits and features of the supervision space (see Figure 18, full-scale maps are included in Appendix G).

**Figure 18**

*Revised thematic map presented in subsequent member checking interviews*



This revised thematic map was then presented in subsequent member checking interviews to which all respondents identified the key wellbeing aspect and shared feedback that the thematic map *'encapsulates the experience really well.'* (ppt4)

Participants shared their reflections on the member checking process providing further opportunity to recognise shared experience, recognising that *'the stressors and barriers are the same or very similar for SENCos, though the school culture can make the role look different from the outside.'* (ppt3)

Overall, there was consistent feedback given that SENCos felt the findings reflected their experience, with one SENCo stating they *'wouldn't change anything, nothing sits*

*uncomfortably, it shows all my experience of being a SENCo and how supervision supports us as SENCos.'* (ppt3)

### 6.3.6 Summary of Phase 2 & 3 findings

Findings from the SENCo interviews demonstrate there were many perceived benefits to interprofessional group supervision and that these benefits were felt to outweigh the associated costs in terms of time in the sessions (i.e., out of direct SENCo work in schools). Member checking of themes highlighted the salience of the restorative impact of supervision for SENCo wellbeing and resilience, reinforcing the importance of feeling recognised and not alone in their experience. The formative benefits of interprofessional group supervision were evident across codes relating to collaborative problem solving, opportunities to reflect and gain a different professional perspective. Interview data provided a clear picture of the challenging professional context for SENCos and recognised need for supervision. Thematic analysis highlighted the importance of the supervision space and group in meeting these professional needs and contributing towards the benefits experienced. SENCo interviews demonstrated common systemic factors within school systems that presented barriers or facilitators to SENCo attendance and experience of supervision, with particular emphasis on school leadership and culture, linking to general understanding of supervision in school.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Overview: putting the key findings into context**

The aim of this study was to gain insight into SENCo perceptions of interprofessional group supervision and its impact. This research aimed to address the identified gap in current literature around SEN school staff by highlighting the voice and professional experiences of SENCos, as well as identifying relevant systemic factors impacting the application of supervision within specific local and school contexts. These findings contribute towards a shared understanding interprofessional group supervision and its impact for SENCos. This relates to broader discussions across Educational Psychology and teaching professions regarding opportunities for professional reflection and systemic, multidisciplinary working in promoting wellbeing and inclusive practice in schools. The key findings are discussed in reference to the original research questions and the implications for future practice and research across professional EP service and educational domains are discussed.

### **RQ1. What impact do SENCos perceive their engagement with interprofessional group supervision to have had on them and their surrounding systems?**

Put simply, this broad question sought to find out what SENCos feel supervision has done for and to them and their school. Taken together, the findings suggest that supervision has not done anything functionally *to* or *for* SENCos, but that positive

impact and change has been fostered *by* and *with* SENCo supervisees through the meeting of their professional needs. This study highlights how interprofessional group supervision can be used to provide the protected space, time and professional support to facilitate SENCos in developing their own skills and resilience, which they then go on to share within their school system. Applying the lens of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) to these research findings highlights the systemic impact of interprofessional group supervision for SENCos and the wider systems in which they operate. The positive outcomes fostered and realised by individual SENCos at the heart of their school microsystem go on to shape broader inclusive practice and wellbeing in schools, while further developing shared knowledge and skills to benefit service-users and facilitate informed multidisciplinary working at a mesosystemic level. Returning to Scaife's (2001) definition of supervision, this study indicates that it is the 'enhancing of [supervisees'] own personal and professional development' through supervision that enables them to provide 'the best possible service to clients'. This reflects the argument that interprofessional group supervision for SENCos offering a 'return on investment', as was experienced by SENCos themselves.

RQ 1.1 How do SENCos perceive their experience of group supervision to have impacted their professional and personal wellbeing?

### *Restorative support*

The current survey and interview findings converge with that of other recent research in highlighting the restorative impact of group supervision felt personally and professionally



by school staff (Reid & Soan, 2019; Willis & Baines, 2018). Findings align with existing research highlighting the SENCo role as lonely in schools (Curran & Boddison, 2021). This study demonstrates that SENCo wellbeing is improved through SENCos' engagement with a protected professional space in which SENCos realised they are not alone in their experience and feel supported within that shared recognition of the challenges they face. This mirrors the language of 'knowing you're not alone' from survey findings presented by Osborne and Burton (2014) of ELSAs similarly valuing the experience of group supervision for feeling collective reassurance and less isolated in their experience. This reflects Hawkins and Shohet's argument that group supervision, unlike individual supervision, offers an opportunity for supervisees to share their worries and realise that others face similar issues in their work (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989). This also relates to the theme of belonging arising from SENCo experiences, with reference to 'SENCo buddies' and forming a collective 'island' with other SENCos reflecting the sense of unity described elsewhere in the group supervision (Osborne & Burton, 2014). Interview findings emphasise the importance of recognising the personal impact of SENCo work on the individual and their personal microsystems (i.e., SENCos' families and home life) as a benefit of supervision identified was support in not 'taking work home.' This links to the underlying themes of relief and protected space that SENCos reported experiencing in the run up to, during and following a supervision session. It is evident how much value SENCos placed on knowing this time was ear marked for them to address their professional needs of sharing, processing and reflecting on the challenging work they face daily.

As the frequency of supervision sessions is once every half term, it raises questions about the opportunities SENCOs typically have across the school day and year in which to feel supported, understood and appreciated outside of this sort of supervision space. As these feelings are key contributors to job satisfaction and wellbeing.

#### *Directions and mechanisms of restorative impact*

As highlighted in member checking interviews, there were several interconnected factors to supervision impact observed by SENCOs. This illustrates several different mechanisms by which SENCOs reported experiencing improved wellbeing through supervision. For example, some SENCOs highlighted the direction of impact from formative to restorative outcomes, i.e., the solving of problems and receiving of advice helping to lower feelings of stress and overwhelm which improves SENCO wellbeing overall. However, a trend that appeared across interview responses was SENCOs recognising they did not need to have brought an issue for discussion or have actions and solutions identified during a session for them to experience a mental health 'boost'. This suggests that the underlying principles of containment and belonging were key in SENCOs' experiencing a restorative benefit from supervision sessions. The reduction in stress and renewed sense of direction following formative discussions and problem solving therefore appear to offer an augmented effect on SENCO wellbeing.

#### *Protective factors*

Further to confirmation of the restorative function of supervision for SENCO wellbeing around the time of a supervision session, the present research highlights an extension of this impact with supervision offering factors which serve to protect supervisee wellbeing and confidence for future challenges. Opportunities for SENCOs to recognise

their own competence in holding expertise they can share with others also serves to build individual confidence in the face of upcoming problems. This notion of '*confidence to do the job and confidence to stick with the job*' is an important finding in the context of rising concerns around job satisfaction and burnout (Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2021) and aligns with existing findings of supervision impacting sense of professional resilience (Reid & Soan, 2019).

The identification of peer support networks arising from the SENCo supervision group is also a salient point for reflection as many SENCos described their experience in local SENCo partnership networks within the county. SENCos made a distinction based on the more instructional purpose of these partnership networks and the protected group space within supervision in which they experienced more personal connection and feelings of safety through sharing and self-directed group discussions. This highlights the power of the process and practice of group supervision, which sits distinct from other professional practices that may appear to have similar components. The psychological underpinnings of group supervision are therefore important to consider when discussing available support structures for SENCo and other professionals.

RQ 1.2 How do SENCos perceive their experience of intergroup supervision to have impacted their professional practice and work to improve outcomes for service-users?

#### *Formative development*

This research highlighted the formative development opportunities experienced by SENCos accessing supervision, which contrasts with reports of limited capacity and

support available elsewhere in schools for SENCoS to solve problems in their daily work. The expertise of the group served as a valuable resource to SENCoS, who themselves gained and contributed in terms of being sharing ideas, advice and resources with SENCo peers, based on experience of what has worked in their own school settings when faced with similar difficulties. This reflects the findings reported by Willis and Baines (2018) of supervisees valuing the opportunity to work in a group with and from which to pool expertise, building professional knowledge and support with sharing and discussion. This exemplifies Hanko's psychodynamic approach (1985) to group supervision and links to the process of recognising personal competence and expertise through joint exploration of a problem within the group. This is an important point to emphasise in the professional context of SENCo work, given SENCo feelings of isolation and individual overwhelm combined with ongoing need for evolving professional knowledge and problem-solving skills to support operational and strategic inclusion aims.

The problem-solving processes described from SENCo responses highlighted the formative impact coming from within the group rather than a sense of questions being answered and directions given, i.e., by an instructional supervisor. SENCoS crucially recognised the impact of supervision on their ability to critically reflect on the provision available in their setting, with information sharing from other about alternative approaches. This opportunity for professional reflection reflects the process of adult learning modelled in Kolb's experiential learning cycle in which SENCoS described their appreciation for space to reflect within the group and apply learning outside as part of an ongoing process of iterative review (Kolb, 2014). It is also important to note the

experience of gentle challenge and curiosity within the group which served to diversify and expand thinking around discussed topics. This demonstrates the potential for more holistic understanding of and provision for CYP with SEND when supporting staff have access to these kinds of group supervision spaces.

#### *Directions and mechanism of formative impact*

As suggested above and evident from the thematic mapping process, SENCOs perceived the impact of supervision to be multi-faceted and multi-directional. Some SENCOs reported the influence of restorative support in laying foundation to formative development. For example, SENCOs described feeling safe within a non-judgmental and protected space from which to reflect on and share difficult problems and get advice on issues which they had not been able to solve on their own. Similarly, the protective factors identified, such as resilience to keep going in the role, also reflect a significant impact to the professional practice and ongoing delivery of SENCO work to support CYP with SEND. This insight from SENCOs is valuable to share with school leaders and those in a position to allocate resourcing based on perceived outcomes. Considering the current professional context of SENCO burnout and staff turnover (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2021), supporting staff wellbeing and capacity is an important foundation to effective skill development and retention to keep SENCOs in the role in which this expertise can be applied to best support CYP provision.

#### *Systemic applications*

An exciting aspect of the present research is its contribution to the understanding of how supervision experience at an individual level can prompt change and application of learning at a more systemic level. The passionate feedback and plans shared by

SENCOs looking to expand their supervision experience to their own school system and interactions was reflective of this. SENCOs shared examples of using tools and principles from their supervision experience in their discussions with CYP, individual colleagues and staff teams. A particularly powerful reflection shared by several SENCOs was the learning taken from supervision around empathising with and empowering others to identify solutions themselves to challenging problems. This presents valuable examples of systemic applications from SENCO supervision experience which serve to improve practice and outcomes for service-users and SENCOs themselves. Indeed, several SENCOs shared how supervision had helped them to recognise patterns in their previous work of defaulting to doing things for staff or prescribing solutions to problems. This in turn contributes to the feelings of being pulled away from SENCO priorities towards other school demands and the overwhelming sense of individual responsibility reported by SENCOs in school. This example of professional reflection, learning and upskilling further supports the idea of supervision being a valuable investment with impact across the school system.

RQ 1.3 Do SENCOs perceive their experience of interprofessional SENCO group supervision to have improved their understanding of the SENCO role and that of EPs?

#### *Understanding of the EP role*

The interprofessional group supervision sessions were also experienced as opportunities to develop knowledge around the role of EPs, both through discussions with other SENCO peers about use of EP time in other schools and from the EP

supervisor themselves. This is a pertinent finding considering recent research that highlights a lack of understanding of the EP role among SENCOs, the key commissioners of EP time in school (Ferguson, 2022). The experience of working with an EP supervisor, outside of the typical remit of individual casework in school, offers points of learning relevant to broader multidisciplinary collaboration. The observation of EP skills being used in the context of supporting adults offers examples of how else SENCOs could contract EP time in school and the value of EPs in more systemic means of supporting CYP with SEND through support to school staff and/or parents.

In the context of the present case study, any SENCO across the Shire County was invited to participate in the supervision groups, which included SENCOs of schools who do not buy in traded services from Local Authority EPs. This means that some SENCO supervisees may not have worked with an EP outside of individual CYP casework as part of the statutory EHC Needs Assessment process. The delivery of SENCO group supervision from the EP service therefore provides a novel opportunity to engage a wider range of local SENCOs in multidisciplinary working and broaden the understanding of systemic EP role across the county, when this cannot otherwise be achieved through contracting of traded involvement.

#### *Understanding of the SENCO role*

Interview response data indicated that SENCOs largely did not report a difference in their perception of the SENCO role from engaging with supervision. However, the researcher suggests there is possible incongruence between this report from SENCOs when initially asked about change in understanding of SENCO role compared to the examples and views expressed elsewhere during interviews which arguably

demonstrate a shift in understanding. For example, SENCo reports of clarifying parameters of their role with colleagues as *coordinating* rather than directly providing SEN support, like preparation of classroom resources, to minimise taking on additional tasks outside of their role and encourage ownership amongst other staff and parents. This may perhaps reflect SENCo experiences of having renewed confidence in asserting the bounds of their role to others and modelling awareness and protection of SENCo time for SENCo-specific responsibilities. This may not represent new knowledge or understanding to the SENCo from supervision per se, though several SENCos shared examples of reinforcements offered by the supervising EP and SENCo peers around what is and is not within the SENCo role. It could therefore be argued that supervision supports SENCos to reflect on their role and how they can shape the outwards presentation of the SENCo role to colleagues. This links to the reflections on use of supervisor questions to facilitate problem-solving by others rather than offering 'ready-made' solutions that do not contribute to the wider understanding of SEND being developed across staff.

## **RQ2. What system-level factors impact interprofessional group supervision?**

Bronfenbrenner's systemic model identifies a role for individual factors in contributing to a person's development and experience. This aligns with recognition for the central role of the supervisee in the supervision process (Milne, 2009) and the influence of individual perceptions to the identification and experience of supervision benefits



(Proctor, 2008). The systemic lens to this research informs a focus on exploring factors beyond the individual to understand the role of systems around SENCOs. Convergence across survey and interview data, as well as feedback during the member checking phase, highlights shared experiences across a number of individual SENCOs, who will hold differing personal and biological characteristics. This reinforces the approach to shift focus away from the individual in role, i.e., the SENCO facing complex professional challenges, and towards the systems in which they operate. The above research question therefore sought to explore the systemic factors surrounding SENCOs to inform future research and implementation of supervision to consider the impact of which impact the efficacy and experience of supervision. The answer to this question can inform subsequent guidance and practice on how best to provide systemic support and structures around SENCOs that will enable the possible benefits of supervision to be realised in practice.

The findings relate predominantly to factors at the microsystem level, i.e., within a SENCO's school and within the temporary microsystem that is the SENCO supervision group itself. These in turn relate to mesosystemic interactions and can be shaped by the influence of broader systemic factors like social culture and political ideologies around education and supervision. An additional layer to the picture that emerged from SENCO interviews was that of the chronosystemic influence. The case study sample included SENCOs with a range of professional experience in the role of SENCO and with supervision practice. It therefore highlighted the temporal impact on SENCO experiences when comparing the reports of SENCOs new to the role with those well-established for many years. Similarly, reports around understanding of supervision as a

professional concept and practice varied based on prior experience. This was highlighted by reports from a new SENCo (still in training) of the function of supervision changing overtime as they became more familiar with the basic professional expectations of the role. Supervision in this instance served initially as a mostly formative and normative space in which to identify the relevant procedures to follow, understanding SEN and prioritising tasks to manage administrative demands. Over time and with greater experience as a SENCo, the experience of supervision was then felt to shift, with emphasis on the restorative and protective factors arising from the group supervision space. This chronosystemic factor reflects the dynamic nature of supervision as a practice.

RQ 2.1 What features, processes and/or mechanisms of interprofessional group supervision did SENCos particularly value or identify as impactful to their experience of supervision?

### *The supervision space*

This study highlights the importance of the supervision space to SENCos' experience of supervision. Three of the subthemes identified as underpinning the supervision space were a function of the supervision group. As outlined in recent guidance (C. Carroll et al., 2020) the opportunity to listen and feel heard in a safe and non-judgmental space is an important part of supervision. The experience of this containment and belonging through shared recognition of challenges and experience was evident in the findings as SENCo interviews identified the group dynamic and interactions with SENCo peers being key. This supports Hawkins and Shohet's proposal that opportunities for

emotional containment are augmented in a group supervision context compared with individual (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989).

### *Supervision group*

The research findings give weight to the view of group supervision as providing more diverse perspectives and further reflective insight to a given problem, as outlined in Proctor & Inskipp's analogy of a tower with many windows (Proctor & Inskipp, 2001).

The role of co-construction was significant in the group context to agree aims and a preferred process within sessions to meet the needs of the SENCo supervisees, which links to existing findings which suggest the importance of flexibility for supervisees regarding supervision processes (France & Billington, 2020).

The supportive group dynamic was seen to underpin much of the shared learning, which reflects Abels' (1977) foundational view of group supervision representing the natural context in which people learn and change. Similarly, where SENCos reported varying experiences of support within their own school system and SLT colleagues around the demands of their role and importance of supervision, the supervision group offered a peer space in which SENCos felt a shared commitment to and valuation of the supervision opportunity.

As is reflected in the exemplar quotes presented to contextualise thematic findings, SENCos' experience of the supervision group as a support system and sounding board underpins much of the impact they recognise in terms of wellbeing and learning. As proposed by de Haan and Proctor (de Haan, 2012; Proctor, 2008), this adds further

evidence to support the view that the benefits of group supervision outweigh any associated challenges or nuance brought in by the group dynamic.

### *EP contribution*

An important finding from this case study research was the role of the EP supervisor as part of the interprofessional dynamic. Interview data adds weight to the suggestion that interprofessional supervision supports professionals to gently challenge assumptions to practice (Hutchings et al., 2014). As suggested by Hanko, the different professional perspective provided by EPs was valued by SENCos given the shared understanding of school systems while remaining at a distance from the problem (Hanko, 2002). The skill and knowledge relating to supervision was important to SENCos who felt the EP skilfully facilitated discussion rather than directing. This reflects the psychodynamic practice outlined by Hanko (1985), which supports collaborative problem solving within the group. This is relevant more broadly when thinking about multidisciplinary practice and the prevailing 'expert model' that can shadow interactions between SENCos and EPs. This interprofessional group supervision space allows for SENCos to be supported and empowered in identifying relevant strategies themselves, based on their own experience and the expertise of others in their role.

As outlined when introducing the concept of supervision, there are challenges to ensuring shared understanding and protection of supervision when conflated with or adjacent to other agendas like line management. As such, the finding that SENCos particularly value the contribution of EP supervisors supports the delivery of supervision to SENCos by an EP as a knowledgeable professional operating outside of their school context. In discussion of interprofessional supervision for SENCos, where an embedded

approach to supervision in schools may be interpreted to promote SENCo supervision being led by a different professional within their school, this research emphasises the role of the EP supervisor as a valued facet to the supervision space and its benefits perceived by SENCos. It is therefore important to recognise the diversity and neutrality of professional perspective offered by an EP supervisor who works outside of the school microsystem will differ greatly from the positioning of a supervisor within the school, where the supervision process and aims might be more easily blurred with other adjacent practices like line management which are led by a school agenda. This study clarifies the need for SENCos to access a space which is protected for their own specific professional needs and can draw on a professional network of other SENCos with shared understanding, facilitated by a supervisor with a different professional perspective and systemic positioning.

SENCo reflections on experience of SENCo partnership meetings and forums also give insight into the potential challenges of a SENCo supervision group that was not facilitated by an external professional supervisor and how the skill of an EP in particular is well suited to address these. Specifically, factors like years of experience in the SENCo role, professional and social familiarity with other SENCos in the group, and the differing personalities and social interactions styles of group members all present potential sources of vertical power dynamics and barriers to inclusive discussion. The reflective qualities of EP supervisors recognised by SENCo participants and the consultation skills integral to the profession (which draw on psychological knowledge of social group identity, communication, and adult learning) highlight the particular value of EPs in the role of supervisor in this interprofessional context.

RQ 2.2 What external factors (such as within their school system) did SENCOs identify as facilitators or barriers to their experience of interprofessional group supervision?

This research addresses calls for more exploration of the factors relevant to the introduction and maintenance of supervision practices in school systems (Ayres et al., 2015).

*The demands on SENCOs highlight need and present barriers:*

It is important to note, given the research aim to explore systemic factors impacting SENCO supervision experiences, that the challenges faced by SENCOs represent both reasons why supervision is needed and barriers to accessing that supervision. This is a common trend across educational research as a systemic lens highlights the challenging infrastructure around school staff and its associated demands. Existing research has highlighted the need for a broader perspective to managing school staff workload and stress, with structural changes to reduce the source of the issue rather than the 'symptoms' (Ferguson, 2022). However, where SENCOs themselves may not feel able to change the number or scope of external demands placed on them, awareness of the broader systemic factors can support a proactive approach to engaging in supervision, with efforts made upfront to address the key concerns. Ideas for how this could be implemented within EP work and schools are discussed below.

*Working patterns and valuation of supervision time:*

One of the key barriers identified by SENCOs was that of varied working patterns making it difficult to commit to a supervision session schedule, when changes in school can mean SENCOs are not released from other duties on the day. Although in the

current case study context, supervision groups were initially proposed based on location and available working days, this has proved insufficient to meet the challenge as many SENCoS experience spontaneous changes to the windows in which they are able to do SENCo-related activities. This is an important factor for schools and services to be mindful of given the proportion of SENCoS holding teaching and other responsibilities in school. The protection of agreed time to access a SENCo-related professional development opportunity amidst other school-based demands relates to the school culture and SLT support for SENCo needs which are discussed below.

### *School culture*

A key aspect of the school system identified as a potential facilitator or barrier to SENCo experiences of supervision was the school culture. This was a broad conceptualisation to encompass the various indicators SENCo described as relevant to their experience, including understanding of SEN and the SENCo role across school, SLT recognition of the SENCo role and understanding of supervision, as well as general collaborative practice between colleagues, i.e., working together to support SEN. It is already noted in the literature that school culture will play a part in whether supervision practice becomes an embedded and prioritised part of the school (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008). This is supported by the present findings which share examples from SENCoS in schools that embrace supervision elsewhere, for example having peer supervision groups already in place, and those from SENCoS in schools where they do not feel understood or supported in requesting time for this sort of external professional development.

### *Staff knowledge of supervision*

As supervision is not a standard concept or practice within the education sector, lack of understanding around what supervision is and is not (and how it differs from other practices like coaching or line management) presents a barrier to its implementation.

This is noted across SENCOs (i.e., those reporting no prior experience of supervision and not knowing what to expect when they first joined the group), colleagues and SLT in school. This highlights the risk of assuming a shared understanding around supervision across professional domains, i.e., between EPs delivering the supervision and SENCOs or school staff as potential supervisees. It is noted that SENCOs reported a snowball effect from their own experience of supervision as this prompted recommendation to other SENCOs to engage the following year. But as an emerging practice, it is relevant to consider how the current findings and reflection of supervision being an unfamiliar and potentially misunderstood concept can impact the uptake and commitment to interprofessional supervision groups across the year.

### *SLT support and awareness*

The need for an informed and supportive SLT colleagues was evident for SENCOs to feel respected in their prioritisation of supervision and its relative value to the wider school system. This highlights the guidance developed with Farouk's (2004) process model of group supervision which emphasises engagement with management figures in the early stages of setting up a supervision group.

The present findings suggest there is a need for education of school leaders (and staff) on what supervision is and is not, i.e., that supervision is a tool to support professional development and wellbeing and not for surveillance and performance management. As



outlined in Chapter 1, there is growing demand and guidance for schools to adopt whole-school approaches to staff wellbeing. Developing a school policy to set out a strategic focus and whole-school culture around supervision, which is prioritised by SLT, may be a worthwhile step towards this goal.

## **Strengths and limitations of the present study**

### Limitations

When considering limitations to the current research, it is relevant to reflect on the challenges present. Most notably, that the well-established levels of high SENCo stress and burnout and limited professional capacity underpinning this (which relate to the rationale and importance of this research) also represent significant barriers to participant recruitment in this context. Over the course of survey and interview recruitment and data collection, SENCo sickness, stress and working patterns posed a challenge. The resulting sample size is small as a proportion of SENCos engaging in the interprofessional supervision groups across the county. In addition to the broader professional challenges of working patterns, workload and turn over or leaves of absence, there were likely also factors specifically linked to the research itself that may have represented a barrier to SENCo participation. For example, if SENCos had a negative experience of supervision, they may not feel comfortable sharing that information when the data was being collected by a researcher working within the EPS. Equally, for SENCos highlighting challenges in their own school system, some prospective participants may have felt hesitant about sharing their views due to concern

about the anonymity of their views within the LA context. A contributing factor in this may be the inclusion of an optional question early on in the survey by the EPS which invited participants to state their school, which may have resulted in SENCOs not feeling confident in their reflections being fully anonymous and therefore choosing not to participate in the survey at that point.

This research cannot assert that the findings from the present case study sample of SENCOs surveyed and interviewed are representative of the experiences and views held by SENCOs in other local contexts. The study reflects a snapshot of the experiences shared by a cohort of SENCOs engaging in interprofessional supervision groups within a specific context. As suggested above, bias associated with opt-in sampling method may be present if those with strong views of supervision were most likely to agree to participate. To ensure validity of findings as representative of the wider cohort of SENCOs who had the opportunity to engage in supervision groups, i.e. not only those who chose and were able to attend consistently, it would have been salient to capture the views of those SENCOs who stopped attending supervision sessions altogether, had this been feasible.

There were pragmatic limitations on the scope and length of the initial online survey as a function of the real-world research context. Due to expectations on the researcher to minimise time demands on local SENCOs and concerns that adding length to the existing evaluation methods would reduce overall response rates across the service, the survey questions were adapted so that some items appeared only in the interview phase.

Anonymisation of survey responses meant it was not possible to link responses between SENCo survey and interview participants in order to explore specific individual questions would have allowed for more in-depth exploration of individual views. This would have allowed for the possibility of a more thorough disconfirming case analysis where relevant in emerging survey findings, for example relating to perceptions of one SENCo who did not feel confident to participate in early group discussions.

### Strengths

This research builds on the well-established awareness of the challenging demands and professional context faced by SENCos. Where there is limited research exploring ways for SENCs to be supported in managing these demands (Curran & Boddison, 2021), this study adds greater understanding and examples of how interprofessional group supervision can support SENCos in their complex role. The experiential lens of this research allows for recognition and amplification of SENCo experiences. Use of in-depth interviews and thematic analysis offering a means of reflecting SENCos' own language and constructions (such as 'firefighting' and lonely islands) to convey their experience to a broader audience in across relevant services.

The method of the present research reflects the social constructionist world view on which the research questions are based, with survey and semi-structured interviews offering a flexible approach to gathering SENCo views. The approach is fitting to address the research questions, where external observation to evaluate impact would not (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reflexivity on the part of the researcher, use of supervision to develop thinking and timely involvement of advisory participants, such as

piloting of measures and SENCo member checking of themes, supports the transparency and credibility of the findings, as reflective of the SENCo voice as intended.

Where previous research studies have used surveys to collect supervisee views (e.g., Osborne & Burton, 2014) there has been little scope for in-depth exploration of supervisee experiences and opportunity to gain individual contextual insights. The sequential mixed method design of the present study allows for collection of SENCo responses to a range of questions, with follow-up interviews and thematic analysis providing means to better understand the experiences shared. Where data have been gathered from SENCos across a range of school settings, the detail available in examples shared during interviews is valuable in contextualising the findings and identifying the most salient factors across the case study cohort. The piloting process also served to inform the clarity of measures and efficiency of data collection, minimising the time burden on busy SENCos. It also contributed further to the transparency of the research process for participating SENCos regarding the scope of the research and the extent to which the research process and measures were designed with and for SENCos. This in turn supported participant motivation and trust in the credibility of thematic findings which were reflected the SENCo voice.

### **Future research:**

This research has highlighted promising insights to how interprofessional group supervision can be utilised to bring together SENCos from different school

microsystems and support systemic improvements to professional wellbeing, practice and understanding. Although experiential in focus, the present research highlighted SENCos' experience of feeling a need to bring information back from supervision to feel more confident to challenge and make changes in their school. While SENCos feel an expectation to demonstrate the value of supervision to senior colleagues, future empirical research is needed to build the profile of existing evidence behind supervision as a professional need for SENCos that should be prioritised. This could maintain a focus on SENCo experiences rather than external measures of impact (such as SLT observations of change) but inclusion of measures such as tools to monitor wellbeing before and after supervision sessions and over time would allow for supporting quantitative data to reflect the qualitative insights shared in the present research. Additionally, gathering views of those outside of the supervision group, for example colleagues of SENCo supervisees, is suggested to offer evidence of wider reaching impact (Willis & Baines, 2018), while still aligning with the experiential focus of the present study and research positioning.

Expansion of the present research approach across other local authority, case-study contexts would allow for greater exploration of the specific contextual factors influencing experiences of supervision. Over-arching themes could be identified to inform guidance around good practice for schools and EP services, with appropriate consideration of the specific systems that may vary from one context to another.

## **Implications for future practice and policy:**

### Within the education sector and individual school systems

#### *Recognising and prioritising supervision as a professional need*

The present research highlights the need for the SENCo role to be prioritised and protected in school, where SENCos typically feel pulled away from SEN-related activities to respond to other demands in school (Curran et al., 2018). Survey and interview data highlight this is the case for SENCos when trying to attend external supervision, the time for which ought to be protected but can feel only 'protected-ish' or not at all if the school culture involves an expectation for SENCos to be present 'on demand'.

EP supervision guidance highlights the importance of protecting supervision as a priority, especially in times of change (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010). This research demonstrates there is a need for this to be understood in school systems too.

Therefore, those in leadership positions and SENCos looking to engage in supervision stand to benefit from a clear agreement upfront about the protection of time for supervision, to ensure the SENCo can fully engage in the session whether online or in person without worry or need for distraction. School staff will have procedures in place for occasions when the SENCo is unavailable, e.g., if out of school for a review meeting, and so there can similar be provision made for the window of time in which SENCos are needing to be in a supervision session.

This has implications for policy makers when considering how supervision could be more widely understood and practiced within education and for SENCos specifically.

Indeed, it was suggested by a SENCo interview participant currently completing the NASENCo training, that interprofessional group supervision would be well placed as part of the programme: *'even if it's just to help you realise how important it is to communicate with those professional others, the knowledgeable others.'* This formal introduction to supervisory practice early on within a career as SENCo was proposed as a *'way to get people to be aware that it's there and that it's important and that it's helpful.'* This recognises a lack of understanding around supervision among school staff, particularly from SENCos who may not otherwise be aware of the interprofessional opportunities that are not only available to them but can also offer vital support to their ongoing development and wellbeing. Given the proposed legislative changes and introduction of a SENCo NPQ training programme, this research is timely in proposing the integration of interprofessional supervision with EPs into training for SENCos. This could be done alongside introducing content on the systemic role of EPs as part of the training programme, as the lack of information around EPs within the SENCo training curriculum has been highlighted in previous research (Ferguson, 2022).

### *Staff wellbeing and retention*

The perceived need and value of restorative support from supervision experienced by SENCos highlights the appetite for more support among SENCos to manage the challenging personal and professional demands of the role. The prioritisation of mental wellbeing in the focus of SENCo work (Curran & Boddison, 2021) therefore needs to be reflected in the prioritisation of staff wellbeing by school leaders and policy.

Given the professional context of low job satisfaction and retention among school staff, with around two thirds of SENCoS not reporting intent to remain in the role in 5 years' time (Curran & Boddison, 2021), this research highlights the relevance of addressing SENCo professional needs. The findings highlight the return on investment that is perceived from interprofessional SENCo group supervision. As such, it presents a strong case for school leaders to start prioritising systemic improvements and provision regarding staff culture and support to address this issue, with supervision proposed as an effective way to achieve this.

#### *Integrating supervision within school culture*

Existing recommendations propose the value of introducing reflective practice and staff supervision in schools (Abdinasir, 2019; Lawrence, 2020). As evidenced by the influence of school culture on SENCo experiences in the present findings, supervision is not to be seen as an 'add-on' by school staff but needs to be an embedded model within the school system to support efficacy and maintenance (Hanley, 2017). However, as discussed above, the interprofessional nature of supervision for SENCoS in this context is important, as SENCoS particularly valued the role of EPs as supervisors providing a specific skillset and knowledge of SENCo needs. The recommendation of embedding supervision within school cultures should therefore be seen as complementary to the practice of interprofessional SENCo group supervision with EP supervisors rather than a call to conduct supervision for SENCoS 'inhouse' with other members of school staff in the role of supervisor.



The present findings highlight systemic applications and a 'ripple effect' of supervision learning and tools taken from SENCOs' own experience and transferred into the school setting, but also emphasise the value of EP supervisors to SENCOs' own experience of supervision and belonging in a group of SENCOs from other school settings. Given their systemic reach and work with service-users and professionals at all levels of a school setting, EPs are well placed to support the implementation of supervision practice within schools, such as for senior leaders, groups of teaching staff or teams supporting specific pupils. Indeed, SENCOs may seek support from EPs if wanting to take on the role of supervisor to their colleagues in school. In the specific context of this research, it is the supervision group made up of other SENCOs and the different professional perspective and skillset of an EP supervisor that appears to be especially salient for SENCO supervisees.

#### Across the EP profession and local EP services

##### *Training of EPs*

The present study provides further evidence of the appetite for interprofessional supervision offered by EPs, which has long been recognised within the profession (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010), and its perceived value in this context. This suggests a need for ongoing training and policy developments to ensure relevant content and opportunities for practice are received by TEPs during their doctoral teaching and placement. Similarly, this study supports recognition of interprofessional supervision as an area for ongoing professional development and reflection among qualified EPs working in LA EPSs. For example, thorough introduction to a range of supervision

models (as is already the case during EP training) supported by opportunities to practice facilitation of such group processes and the co-construction of supervision goals or formats during the contracting stage to respond to individual supervisee and group needs, from the role of EP supervisor.

The case study context of this research is specific and, as such, cannot be assumed to generalise to other contexts. However, given the dearth of research into EP delivery of interprofessional group supervision for SENCOs, the present study offers insight into the relevant factors to consider for EP doctorate programmes developing their training and other local authority EPSs looking to introduce such practice. In particular, where research and policy may naturally look to standardise the process or identify replicable features of a group supervision session for 'best practice' guidance, the present research emphasises the variable and personalised nature of group supervision. This highlights the importance of recognising the impact of less tangible psychological factors such as sense of belonging, competence, emotional safety, and containment. As these factors cannot be directly implemented by the supervisor through a standardised session structure but need to be developed in practice *with* the supervision group, the interpersonal skills and application of psychodynamic theory on the part of the EP supervisor is a crucial factor which should be reflected in subsequent policy, training and practice.

#### *Understanding and commissioning of EP work*

This study reflects existing research findings to suggest a lack of awareness among SENCOs of the more systemic aspects of the EP role (Ferguson, 2022). As a

profession, EPs are looking to address this and expand understanding of the broader scope to EP work. This includes relevance of EPs in work to promote mental health in schools (Greig et al., 2019). The present findings can be used to demonstrate a more systemic EP role and provide an example of what EP support for SENCoS could look like, with qualitative insights into the benefits experienced by SENCoS in this context.

The present findings include examples of SENCoS changing the way they commission EP time. In particular, one SENCo reported that they were unable to continue with the supervision group for a second year due to working patterns but instead is using some of the available traded time for individual supervision with their link EP. It is noted that the SENCo appeared unsure of this as an alternative to the group supervision context, but their seeking a means of interprofessional supervision through traded EP time indicates the perceived benefit to any supervision opportunities from EPs.

Further to the benefits cited by SENCoS, contracting of EP supervision for SENCo groups also offers an opportunity for reciprocal learning in which EP supervisors can also gain greater understanding of service-user needs and the challenges faced by the SENCoS in their schools. Having EPs in the role of interprofessional supervisor to groups of SENCoS offers a cohesive approach to multiagency working and understanding between two key professional groups and systems working to improve outcomes for vulnerable CYP.

### *Supporting understanding and prioritisation of supervision among SLT*

This research highlights the importance of SLT having a shared understanding and prioritisation of SENCo supervision so the SENCo is supported in attending the

sessions. EP services delivering interprofessional supervision groups could therefore support this by involving SLT in the contracting process when SENCOs commit to the groups. This could reflect practices seen elsewhere such as in the contracting of ELSA training to ensure SLT are aware of the benefits of supervision and what is required on the part of the school to support effective outcomes. Given the lack of understanding of supervision among school staff reported by some SENCOs, EPs could offer preliminary training for SLT in the aims and benefits of supervision to ensure the relevant knowledge is held in school and increase the likelihood of SENCOs feeling supported. Similarly, raising SLT awareness of collaborative learning and alternative approaches to systemic work in schools, for example introducing supervision processes into staff meetings, may help to build shared understanding of valuable supervision processes and their scope to support school improvement more broadly.

#### *Promoting commitment to consistent supervision group attendance for SENCOs*

As was demonstrated across survey and interview data, inconsistent attendance from individual SENCOs (due to various systemic barriers, as noted in the findings) was identified as a barrier to ongoing group dynamics and delivery of sessions. Based on feedback from SENCOs about lack of prioritisation of supervision among SLT, the EPS has since introduced a notional fee for attendance of sessions, which is paid upfront. The aim of this is to foster a shared valuation and investment into the supervision group. Given the longstanding legislative drive for joined up working as best practice across services (SEND Code of Practice, Department for Education, 2015), the challenge of SENCO attendance also reflects a need for greater recognition of interprofessional

supervision at all levels of the ecosystem. Top-down support and prioritisation from senior leadership in LA services would improve recognition of interprofessional supervision as an important multidisciplinary practice and could prompt more senior leaders in school to prioritise resourcing to enable SENCOs to attend supervision. In addition to the contracting work done by the EPS, specific policies and funding which recognise the importance of protected time for supervision in this context will support consistent uptake for this emerging practice to meet the professional needs of SENCOs and other important figures operating within the ecosystem to support vulnerable CYP.

### *Language of supervision*

In light of the social constructionist underpinnings to the present research, it is relevant to consider the implication of language and terminology used when striving to build a shared understanding of what supervision is and is not for SENCOs and SLT. It was noted that some SENCOs identified a lack of understanding or negative perception of supervision among colleagues, based on the idea that supervision implies a need for monitoring, i.e., a performance management need. This reflection has been highlighted in previous research (Ferguson, 2022) which has suggested that alternative terminology can be used if helpful to reframe the expectations. For example, changing staff supervision to staff 'drop-in sessions' to emphasise it is voluntary and designed to be helpful to the individual. Guidance on clinical supervision (McTaggart et al., 2014) gives the example of reframing language such as 'super vision' if appropriate to the aims, e.g., gaining new perspective on a problem. In the case of interprofessional group supervision, previous experiences of supervision, for example in a one-to-one context may also shape staff expectations. Therefore, it is relevant for individual EPs and EP

services to carefully consider use of terminology and identify appropriate framing or alternatives that seem most relevant to the specific context. Indeed, this may be an opportunity for co-construction of preferred terminology with service-users, once there is understanding on the scope and key function of the experience. Whatever language is suggested or agreed in relation to supervision, clarity around the boundaries of supervision as a separate professional practice from e.g., line management is important when supporting schools to promote supervision practice. Particularly in the context of interprofessional supervision facilitated by an EP, the language used will be important in ensuring understanding of how supervision is different from other professional agendas and could help to support implementation of supervision for SENCOs as an external arrangement (as in the present context) where possible blurring of roles and agendas within school may present a barrier to SENCOs experiencing the same benefits of supervision led by a colleague without the same interprofessional skills and positioning of an EP.

#### Researcher's own learning and implications for individual EP practice

In terms of the research process, the sequential design of the present study was helpful in supporting my own understanding of the research topic and gaining greater contextual insight into the professional participant sample of interest. Although the survey response rate was low, relative to the number of SENCOs initially enrolled in supervision and therefore eligible to participate, the funneled data collection process allowed for valuable additional learning from even a few of the SENCOs who completed the survey and not the following interview phase. The disconfirming example of a survey participant who felt less confident to contribute in their supervision group due to a

perception of other group members already knowing each other highlighted a contrary experience to the sense of belonging described as a feature of the supervision space. This prompted important reflections about sampling bias and additional barriers to participation in this context, when participants may feel hesitant to offer criticism or share negative experiences in an interview setting, where an anonymous survey may feel more comfortable. The survey phase also helped to inform the piloting of the interview schedule to follow-up on learning and specific questions arising from the survey data which was invaluable to the richness of interview data subsequently collected. The sequential method also informed my thinking and engagement with the process of reflexive thematic analysis as the survey findings helped to ground the themes arising from the more detailed interview data.

From the findings of the present research, I learned that the experiential factor of what the supervision space felt like and represented to participants was incredibly salient and seemed more strongly linked to their perception of impact than an observable features of what the supervision session looked like in terms of content or structure. This learning has implications for me at every level of work as an EP and emphasises the power of underlying psychological processes when engaging service-users in a consultation or assessment. It has made me even more mindful of the negotiation process behind a piece of work and the value of co-construction in giving space to ensure a shared understanding of the present goals and opportunities for everyone to feel heard before engaging in problem-solving discussions. In the case of group work in particular, this study has emphasized the importance of protecting time to ensure everyone has been able to contribute to and understand the aims to support buy-in and

commitment across the group which promotes collaboration and constructive reflections going forward. Although the case study sample and context of the present research has limitations which mean findings should not be generalized, its suggestion that the supervision group itself represents a key mechanism for impact is highly relevant to keep in mind for much EP work. In particular, where research and policy may adopt a procedural lens to distil the impactful features of supervision or other group work by looking to the structure used or content covered, I am mindful in my own practice as an EP to promote positive impact through prioritising the psychological foundations of a safe and constructive environment that feels constructed by and with the group and its individual participants.

## **Conclusion:**

This research contributes to the emerging research literature around interprofessional group supervision and its systemic impact for staff in schools. The present findings cannot be transferred from this particular case study context and assumed to evidence the impact of such supervision in varied other contexts. However, the challenging professional context to SENCo work identified appears to reflect the broader picture of overwhelm and isolation suggested in national data. The scope and salience of the benefits perceived by SENCos in this case study context therefore supports further exploration of supervision opportunities for SENCos and school staff, recognising the potential role of EP supervisors in this emerging practice to support effective supervision group spaces. Where previous research has typically placed emphasis on



the process of supervision, these findings highlight a shared experience of interprofessional supervision as highly beneficial, despite variable supervision models or structures being used by groups. This adds new insight into power of co-construction and group negotiation/purposeful agreement of aims and dynamic evolution of working practices to best suit individual and collective goals.

In the national context of limited professional capacity and funds, there can be an emphasis on empirical data to present an 'objective' evidence-base in support of a proposed intervention or change to practice. The present research strengthens existing emerging evidence as to the benefits of interprofessional group supervision experienced by key professionals in schools. This study reinforces understanding of supervision as offering valuable restorative, formative and normative support to supervisees. Thematic findings highlight the importance of the supervision group as a tool in developing the relevant supervision space in which these benefits can be experienced. Where this study represents new insight and strength to the calls for supervision in school, is the conceptualisation of interprofessional group supervision in this context representing a significant return on the initial investment required of professionals and schools. This finding, shaped by the language and experiential constructions shared by SENCo participants, presents a case for implementing interprofessional SENCo group supervision as systemic use of EP time to invest in the development of wellbeing, knowledge and inclusive practice within and across school systems.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A – Literature search strategy and process**

The literature search accessed studies through EBSCO (ERIC, PsychINFO,) Google Scholar and UCL Explore. A broad range of search terms were used to capture relevant research publications, including:

("educational psychology" AND "group supervision") OR ("educational psychology" AND "group consultation" AND "SENCO") OR ("educational psychology" AND "group consultation" AND "Special Educational Needs Coordinator") OR ("educational psychology" AND "group work" AND "school") OR ("school staff" AND "group supervision") OR ("school staff" AND "group consultation") OR ("educational psychology" AND "group supervision") OR ("SENCO" AND "supervision") OR ("interprofessional supervision" AND "school") OR ("interprofessional consultation" AND "school") OR ("interprofessional" AND "group work" AND "school.")

Identified publications were screened for relevance to the current research questions and professional context. When searching for relevant literature, an initial date filter was also applied to select only papers from 2015 onwards, to ensure relevance to current practice under existing guidance according to the 2015 SEND Code of Practice, which brought about changes to role of SENCOs and the process for professional involvement around CYP with SEND more broadly. However, where the majority of relevant research publications exploring interprofessional group supervision involved other professional or school-based roles (for example family support workers, teachers and

Emotional Literacy Support Assistants, ELSAs), search terms were widened, and older studies included if deemed to be relevant to the current context of exploring research evaluation of group supervision processes and experiences.

In the initial search, research literature such as thesis publications and independent guidance documents were excluded on the basis that they have not gone through the same rigorous peer-review process as published journal articles, to ensure a consistent level of quality assurance.

The aim of the literature search was to identify and review relevant research and highlight formative examples of research publications which offer methodological or theoretical insight or a point of critical reflection to inform the development of the present research.

## Appendix B – Online SENCo survey

# SEnCo group supervision - post evaluation survey

Thank you for completing this post-SEnCo supervision survey. Your opinions and thoughts are valuable to us and will help us plan our work for next year.

There is also the chance to include your feedback in a doctoral thesis this year for one of the trainee EPs working in our service – please see the information at the end of the survey for more details.

Please note that we may use some comments when advertising SEnCo supervision next year. There is a box at the end to give consent for us to use your comments in this way.

1. What school are you from? (optional)

2. How many sessions were you able to attend?

1

2

3

4

5

3. How confident did you feel to participate in your supervision sessions?

Extremely confident

Confident

Neutral

Not confident

Extremely not confident

4. How effective and valuable did you find attending a group supervision session?

- Very effective
- Effective
- Neither effective nor ineffective
- Ineffective
- Very ineffective

5. Additional comments to your answer above

6. What do you feel has made supervision effective and valuable?

7. What do you feel you have gained from attending the supervision sessions?

*Please tick any/all that apply and add further examples or comments below if relevant.*

- I have developed my knowledge and skills
- I was able to reflect upon our school's provision for pupils with SEN
- I have developed my support network
- I have formed links with other SENCOs in my local area
- I feel more confident in my role
- I was able to reflect upon my school's support for me in my professional role and wellbeing

8. *Please share examples or other comments if relevant to your answer above.*



9. Please indicate below how, if at all, you feel accessing the SENCo supervision group has impacted your wellbeing.

Engaging in professional group supervision with other SENCos has:

- Significantly improved my wellbeing
- Improved my wellbeing
- Neither improved nor worsened my wellbeing (no impact)
- Worsened my wellbeing
- Significantly worsened my wellbeing

10. *Please share examples or other comments if relevant to your answer above.*

11. Has your involvement in professional group supervision changed how you support other staff in your setting?

- Yes
- No
- Not yet but I would like to next year

12. *Please expand your reasons for either answer above.*

13. How would you summarise SENCo supervision to someone who has not been before?

What is it and what were the benefits?

14. If you have struggled with attending this year, what were the contributing factors for this?

15. What session length would help you to attend?

- 1 hour
- 1.5 hours
- 2 hours

16. How did you find the frequency of the meetings, being every half term?

- Too few
- Just right
- Too many

17. If you were in a mixed group of either nursery, primary or secondary schools, how helpful was this?

- Very helpful
- Helpful
- Neither helpful nor unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Very unhelpful

18. *If you have any additional comments to your answer above, please share them here.*

19. Do you feel the group dynamic impacted your experience of group supervision?

Yes

No

20. *If you answered yes above, please expand your answer (or share examples if relevant.)*

21. Ideally the groups would run face to face, would you prefer to meet in person or is it an efficient use of time to meet virtually?

I would prefer to attend face to face supervision

I would prefer to attend virtual supervision

I would prefer a combination of face to face supervision and virtual supervision

22. *If you have any additional comments to your answer above, please share them here.*

23. Do you have any other comments?

Is there anything you would change about your supervision experience and why?

24. Are you happy for [REDACTED] EP Service to use your comments (*anonymised*) when advertising SENCo supervision next year?

Yes

No

## Consent

### 25. **Consent for survey responses to be included in doctoral research:**

If you consent, your anonymised responses above will also contribute to the doctoral thesis research of Megan von Spreckelsen, Trainee EP who is exploring the experiences of SENCOs accessing professional group supervision and its impact on their practice and wellbeing.

*Please see the attached information sheet for more details and tick the box below if you consent to participate.*

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact Megan at [REDACTED]

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet, and have had the opportunity to consider the information, contact the researcher to ask questions, and have had any questions adequately answered (and have their contact details if wanting to ask further questions).

I consent to my survey responses being anonymised and analysed as part of the doctoral research project: 'Exploring the lived experiences and impact of school SENCOs engaging with EP-led professional group supervision.'

I understand that my participation is voluntary.

I agree that small direct quotes from responses may be used in thesis reports and that these will be anonymised.

Yes

No

26. **Consent for interview follow-up**

I consent to be contacted with a view to arranging an individual follow-up interview with Megan via telephone, Microsoft Teams or in person, as preferred, to discuss my experiences of professional group supervision. (These would be conducted in September or October 2022.)

I understand that I am consenting to be contacted about arranging an interview but that I can withdraw consent at any time.

Yes

No

27. If you consent to be contacted about arranging a follow-up interview, please provide your preferred email address:

28. If you consent to be contacted about arranging a follow-up interview, please provide your preferred contact number:

**29. Request to receive a summary of the research findings:**

If you would like to receive a summary of the doctoral research findings at the end of the project, please provide your preferred email address below.

Email address:

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This content is neither created nor endorsed by Microsoft. The data you submit will be sent to the form owner.





## Appendix C – Semi-structured interview schedule – researcher copy

Exploring the lived experiences and impact of school SENCos engaging with EP-led professional group supervision

Outline of semi-structured interview questions - Researcher copy

### Introduction to study

- Revisit information contained within the Participant Information Sheet, thank them for completing the survey and remind participants that the interview is voluntary and can be stopped at any time if they wish, and that transcript data will be anonymised and stored securely etc.
  - Give participants time to ask any questions
- Allow time for participants to sign and email back the consent form if not possible to receive prior to the interview

### Interview questions (*prompts and clarifying/deepening questions in italics*):

1. Could you tell me about your professional role and responsibilities within your school?
  - *Do you hold any other roles/responsibilities alongside SENCo?*
  - *How is the SENCo role positioned within the school staff structure?*
  - *How many years have you worked as a SENCo?*
  - *Do you work full time as SENCo?*
  - *Would you say there was a strategic aspect to your role within the school?*

- *Are you also Mental Health Lead in your school? (If yes, how do you manage the boundaries and responsibilities of both roles?)*
  - *As SENCo, are you part of the Senior Leadership Team in your setting?*
    - ➔ *If yes, how have you found that/do you find that beneficial?*
  - *If no, what are your thoughts on this/does this present a challenge?*
2. Why did you want to join a SENCo supervision group?
    - *What were your hopes going into the experience?*
  3. What has it been like to have been part of the SENCo supervision group?
    - *How would you describe the group dynamic?*
    - *What did you feel the role of the EP was in relation to SENCo group supervision?*
    - *Do you feel your experience would be different with a different EP facilitating or a different SENCo group size/dynamic?*
  4. How did you perceive the supervision sessions as a use of your time relative to other demands?
  5. What did your supervision sessions look like?
    - *Were they structured in a particular way? Did the sessions follow a particular model? Was it similar across sessions or different each time?*
    - *Were there any particular processes or features of the sessions that you valued the most?*
    - *How was the process/structure of the supervision sessions selected? (Did you agree a system up front, did the EP offer one, did it evolve naturally?)*
  6. What would you say was the most important function of the supervision for you:

- *Normative - support with the task management and administrative aspects of your SENCo role*
  - *Formative – support with professional education to develop your thinking and practice*
  - *Restorative – support with/for your well-being, recognising the emotional impact and stress of your role*
  - *Other?*
7. Have you noticed any changes in your work since engaging with the SENCo supervision group?
- *Has your perception of the SENCo and/or EP role changed since engaging with the supervision?*
  - *Do you think your engagement with supervision has impacted how you interact with the school system around you, e.g., colleagues, parents, children and young people?*
  - *Have you applied any approaches from your supervision group yourself in your own school?*
  - *Can you give an example of using strategies arising from supervision discussions?*
  - *Could you tell me more about your experience – if you haven't tried, why is that/what has stopped you?*
  - *If you have, how did you find applying supervision skills yourself and how was it received?*

8. Have you noticed an impact of SENCo group supervision on your professional and/or personal well-being?
  - *Was there anything in particular that you think had the most impact?*
9. Were there any external factors, for example in your school system, that impacted your experience of the supervision?
  - *Do you have any ideas for how these factors could be mitigated or their impact reduced?*
  - *Are there any changes you think would enable more SENCos to access and engage with professional supervision?*
10. How would you suggest SENCo supervision could be developed in the future?
  - *Are you continuing with SENCo supervision this year? – why/why not?*
11. Given the aim of the study (*‘to explore the lived experiences and impact of school SENCos engaging with EP-led professional group supervision*), is there anything else you think it would be useful for me to know or that you’d be happy to share?
12. Thank you for participating. Do you have any questions for me?

## **Debrief**

- Thank you for giving your time
- Go over contact details if there are queries
- Collect consent for contacting with summary of research findings if they would like a copy of final report/briefing
- **Check consent for contact re. member checking phase?**

If you have any further questions about this research, prior to or following participation, please contact me at [megan.spreckelsen.20@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:megan.spreckelsen.20@ucl.ac.uk).

## Appendix D - Peripheral survey findings

The following survey findings were gathered in response to questions of interest as part of the LA EPS evaluation of EP-led supervision groups but not of direct relevance to the specific research questions in the present study.

They are included below (grouped by topic) for transparency and further interest around the topic of implementing and evaluating EP-led SENCo group supervision:

### *Delivery of the sessions:*

Survey question: Ideally the groups would run face to face, would you prefer to meet in person or is it an efficient use of time to meet virtually?

Response selected	Frequency	% of respondents
I would prefer to attend face to face supervision	5	31.25
I would prefer a combination of face to face supervision and virtual supervision	9	56.25
I would prefer to attend virtual supervision	2	12.5

Qualitative responses highlighted trend of recognising quality of in person sessions for quality interaction and being physically out of the school setting away from distraction, - while highlighting the travel/being away makes attendance more challenging. So, most SENCos have suggested a preference for a flexible combination model of delivery, identifying that virtual sessions make for more likely attendance, even if called away.

- *'I would prefer face to face but realise that this is difficult for some. Headteachers should be encouraged to give their SENCos time to attend face to face as it is important for SENCos' welfare that they get a break for their own CPD.'*

- *'Face to face would mean that it was more protected as you would not be in the building!'*
- *'I think virtual meant that we were more able to attend (no travelling) and could also leave if necessary.'*
- *'I would prefer face to face, but am more likely to be able to take part virtually.'*
- *'Face to face is good for networking. Maybe there could be 3 face to face and 3 virtually. However, I do feel that people opt out more easily from virtual meetings.'*
- *'Difficult one, timing wise and thinking about cover for my class, online has been much easier. However, I miss the benefits of face to face meetings'*

*Session duration and frequency:*

Survey question: What session length would help you to attend?

Response selected	Frequency	% of respondents
1 hour	6	37.5
1.5 hours	8	50
2 hours	1	6.25

Survey question: How did you find the frequency of the meetings, being every half term?

Responses: 100% of SENCOs selected the response 'just right' out of 'too few', 'just right' or 'too many.'

*Group membership*

Survey question: If you were in a mixed group of either nursery, primary or secondary schools, how helpful was this? (Closed and open answers)

10 of the 16 participating SENCOs responded to this question as attending a 'mixed' supervision group.

Response selected	Frequency	% of respondents
Very helpful	2	20
Helpful	5	50
Neither helpful nor unhelpful	3	30
Unhelpful	0	0
Very unhelpful	0	0

## Appendix E – Reflexive journal extracts

The following extracts are provided to illustrate the reflexive process undertaken by the researcher throughout thematic analysis.

### Reflexive Journal

*Reflexivity Is Central to the Audit Trail Researchers are encouraged to keep a self-critical account of the research process, including their internal and external dialogue (Tobin & Begley, 2004). A reflexive journal can be used by researchers to record to document the daily logistics of the research, methodological decisions, and rationales and to record the researcher's personal reflections of their values, interests, and insights information about self (the human instrument; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).*

Nowell, Norris, White & Moules (2017)

### Journal extracts across stages of reflexive thematic analysis

Thesis interviews - Overarching reflections on thesis interviews to hold in mind going forwards:

- TEP researcher positioning within EPS, having worked with some participants through traded school work while on placement vs having not met the majority of SENCOs before.
- Some SENCOs naming their EP supervisor when discussing e.g., what they valued about the EP's skill in facilitating conversation – a reminder of TEP closeness to the research context and possible perceptions of SENCOs that the researcher is colleagues to EP supervisor contributing to social desirability of answers?
- Feedback from SENCO participants at the end of interviews about enjoying the opportunity to share and the content of their interviews suggest a feeling of safety during



the interview to share challenging experiences and insights, for example when eg SLT/system/culture in their school had been a barrier to their access or experience.

Thoughts from thesis transcribing:

- Cleaning of transcripts – wary of not wanting to sanitise or censor the intended meaning of participant language but wanting the quotes to read clearly and be accessible when people naturally er/repeat words as forming sentences ‘live.’
  - ➔ Will take to supervision to discuss relevant criteria if appropriate, transcribing verbatim during first round.
  - ➔ Update: Taken to thesis supervision and raised in thesis writing seminar and agreed helpful to include extract to show example of verbatim transcript and cleaned transcript with defining rules of when something has been removed.

During the initial coding process:

- Noting feelings of frustration at finding it very difficult to generate initial codes that focus on semantic description as currently noticing mind skip to themes or recognising patterns and checking previous codes to match up. Important not to skip phases of the process and go from that data point itself as intended, as can collapse codes at a later stage.
  - Helpful to return to Braun & Clarke thematic analysis book to review the initial sequence and examples of coding stages to avoid skipping ahead – emphasis on reflexivity means you may return to phases as needed.
    - ➔ B&C TA book (pg 35) clarifies coding phase 2 is about systematically working through dataset in fine-grained way – identify interesting/relevant (to RQs) segments and ‘apply pithy analytically-meaningful descriptions (code labels)’
- Key points from re-reading: Coding isn’t just about summarising and reducing content – also to capture my ‘analytic take’ on the data. Meaning making not

finding/extracting (pg 45) -> this aligns well with social constructionist underpinnings to the study.

Peer supervision reflections:

- Supervision with CK: Focus of discussion was re. layout of initial codes across ppts and areas of relevance within a spreadsheet as helpful to think about emerging themes being noticed and value of keeping different saved docs to refer back to where codes came from etc.
- Revisited RQs and considered where wording e.g., 'perceived' impact should be clarified and questions to include reference to function of supervision question (informed by literature)
- SENCo survey data not being thematically analysed but can be descriptively reported as informed interview questions, with content analysis to pick out relevant content (may well reflect subsequent themes, but not taken through same process as some 'qualitative' entries from the survey may be one or two words vs a paragraph of text.
- Supervision with JB: focus of discussion was grouping into themes
- Not projecting top-down research questions as theme headers etc. as narrowness of questions impacts this and is not in line with ppt experiential lens.
- Gathering exemplar quotes, noticed some sub themes were appearing more from some SENCos than others – employed colour coding of ppt codes to visually keep track of representative spread from across ppts to ensure subthemes weren't driven by one SENCo or make a note if so.
- Supervision with AG: focus was re. process of going back through codes and reviewing thematic map

- Reviewed plans for member checking and level of tweaking following ppt feedback.  
Looked to existing research for example questions to clarify whether findings reflect experience and ask about any changes or additions that they would suggest.
- Clarification of member checking process as not using ppt feedback to 'correct' analysis but to ensure transparency and optimise researcher insight into how well the 'findings' reflect individual experience.
  - ➔ Reviewing codes and going through initial codes again highlighted extension of immediate restorative impact to suggest protective/sustaining impact – enabling SENCOs to keep going.
  - ➔ This is salient to literature around burnout and retention rates -> extending conceptualisation from Proctor model of normative, formative and restorative, though important to consider how protective is extension of/different to restorative -> longer term implications and covers professional confidence and competence so not only related to resilience and emotional/affective factors.

## **Appendix F – Transcript cleaning process and example excerpts**

Example transcript excerpts showing original, verbatim transcription of speech followed by the 'cleaned' transcription in which erring and sounds to that effect (eg. 'er' and 'um') were removed for clarity and flow of the point. Repeated words were also removed when the researcher felt this was not intended for emphasis or integral to understand the content but had been said in spontaneous conversation as the participant hesitated or repeated themselves while forming their point. Examples are given across multiple participants to illustrate the consistent approach and criteria used.

### **Ppt6:**

#### Original version

'I'm quite fortunate in that my school is part of a uh a a a sort of an alliance of local schools. So although none of the SENCOs from my surrounding schools were part of my supervision group, Um I do have a network of SENCOs I see in in person um but yeah and yeah, it's not, it doesn't have an EP and it's more of a it's more of a support group and a a a sort of skills sharing than a um than an actual supervision, it's it's just a slightly different purpose.'

#### Cleaned version

'I'm quite fortunate in that my school is part of a sort of an alliance of local schools. So although none of the SENCOs from my surrounding schools were part of my supervision group, I do have a network of SENCOs I see in person but yeah, it's not, it doesn't have an EP and it's more of a support group and a skills sharing than an actual supervision, it's just a slightly different purpose.'

**Ppt1:**

## Original version

'..it gives you some sort of satisfaction in a way that you're not the only person, but also the opportunity to run ideas through people. Um networking um, and reflect. You know, just um having those conversations and having a protected well, I say, protected, protected-*ish* time. Um, where where you know you're gonna you're gonna bring the challenges of the work to that that discussion.'

## Cleaned version

' ..it gives you some sort of satisfaction in a way that you're not the only person, but also the opportunity to run ideas through people, networking and reflect. You know, just having those conversations and having a protected well, I say protected, protected-*ish* time where you know you're gonna bring the challenges of the work to that discussion.'

**Ppt7:**

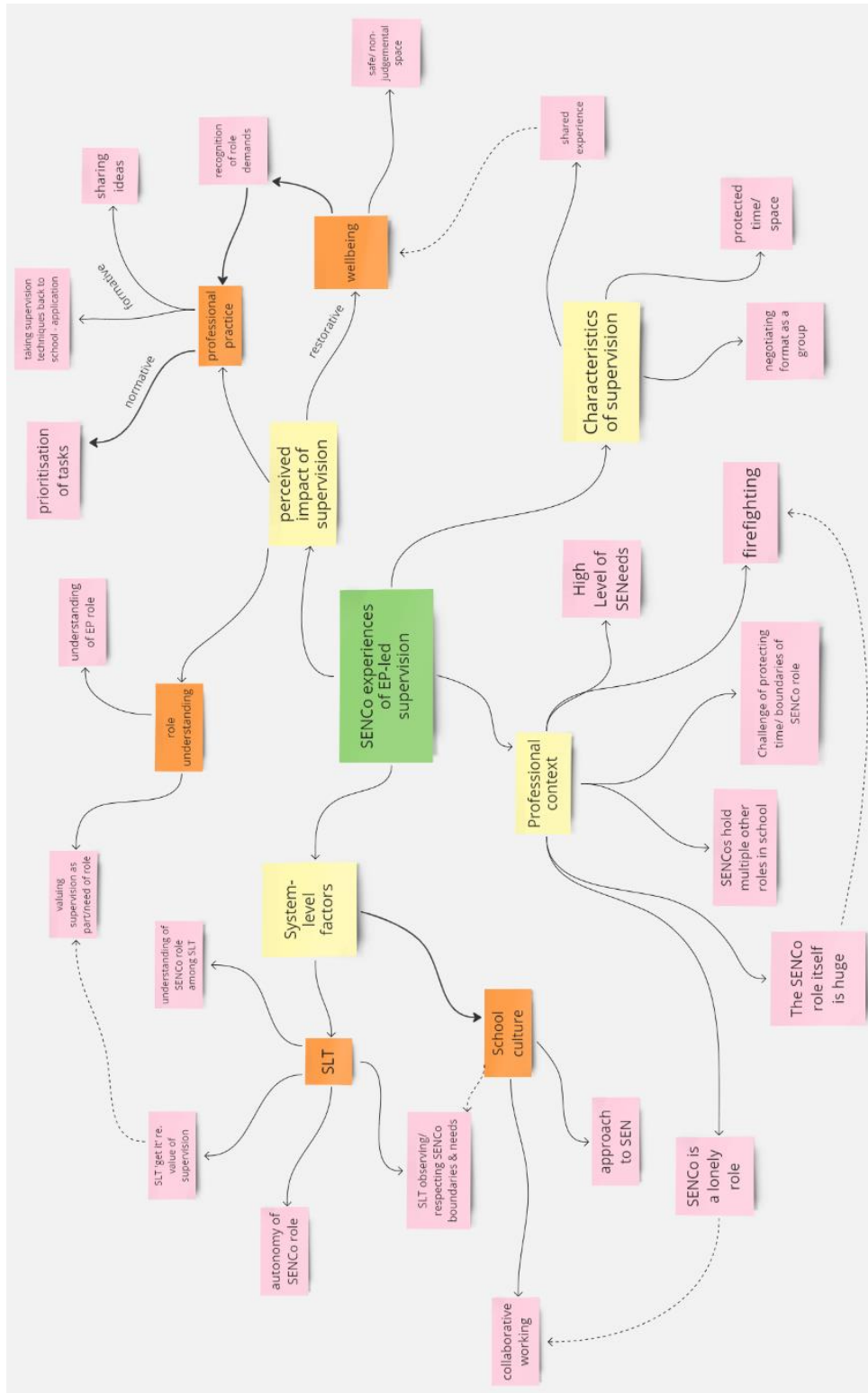
## Original version

'I think it's, er I don't think it's er, I think it's a no brainer. I think it's um something that needs to happen.'

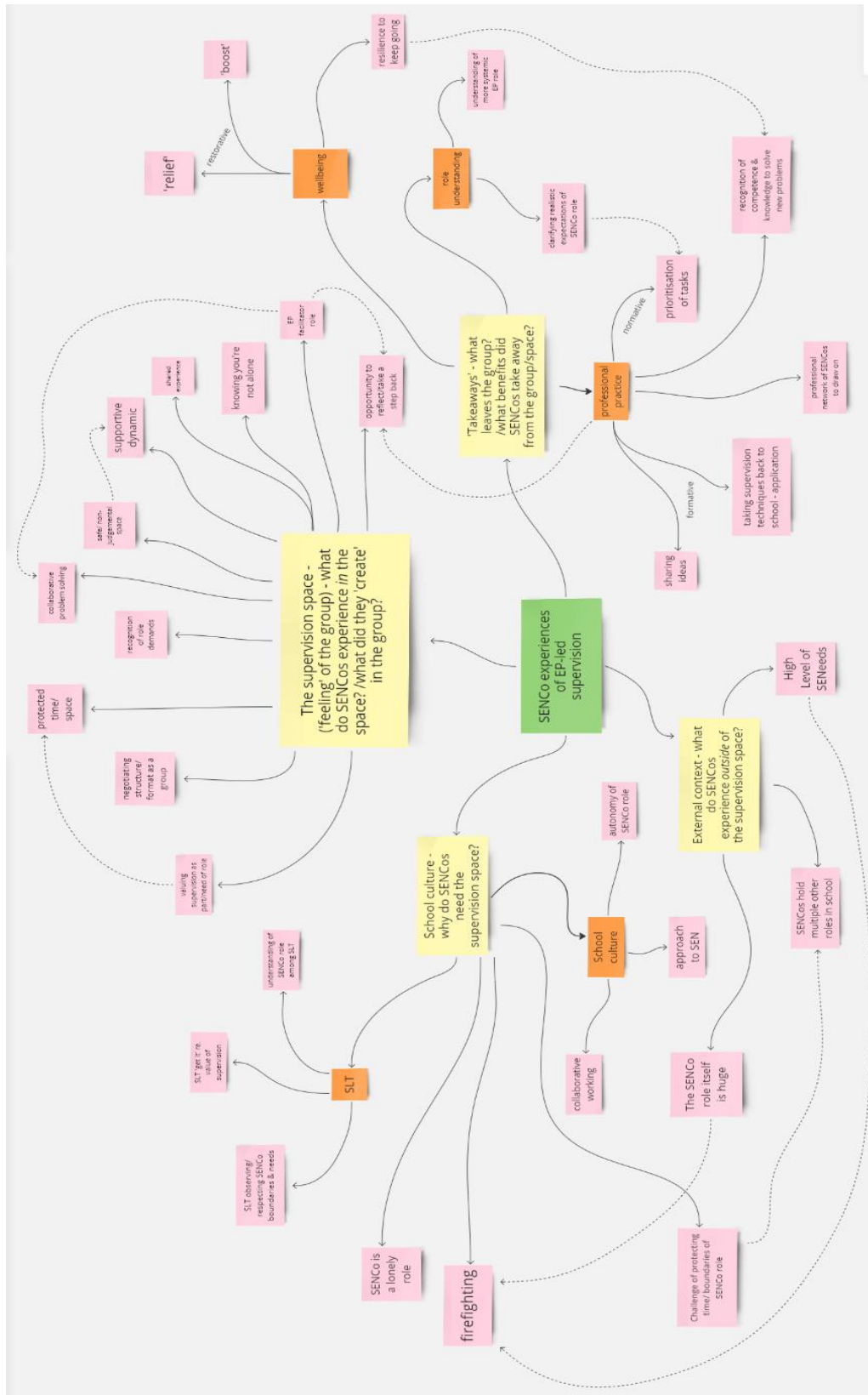
## Cleaned version

'I think it's a no brainer. I think it's something that needs to happen.'

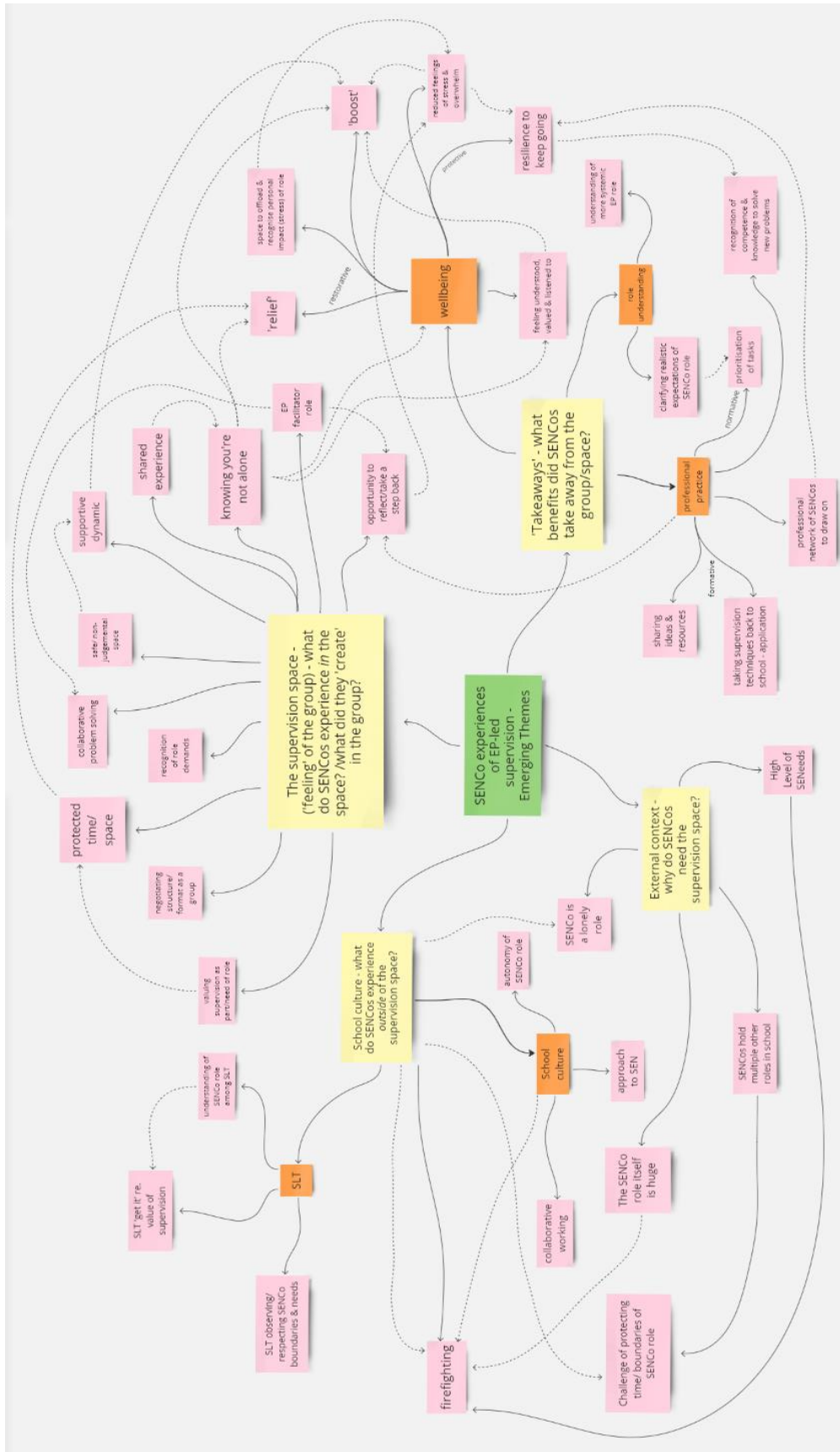
## Appendix G – Full-scale Miro thematic map examples



Miro Thematic map 1: Initial deductive mapping of codes around Research Questions



Miro Thematic map 2: Emerging themes – inductive mapping of codes around participant narratives



Miro Thematic map 3: Mapping of narrative themes based on member-checking feedback



## Appendix H – Thematic table example - Theme 1

Thematic labels & descriptors		Codes	Exemplar quote (interview data)		
<b>MAIN THEME: SENCo SUPERVISION NEEDS</b>	Main theme descriptor: Why do SENCos need the supervision space?	<b>Subtheme: Professional demands of the SENCo role</b>	Subtheme descriptor: External demands and responsibilities attached to fulfilling SENCo role in	Huge scope of SENCo role	<i>'My role has expanded. So it takes into account all of the aspects of inclusion, such as attendance, pupil premium children, EAL. All of those sorts of things. When I first started, I didn't have any leadership responsibilities, but now I do have some leadership responsibilities.'</i> (Ppt2)
				High level of SEN	<i>'There's so many students with SEN, there's so many EHCP students across the county, [local authority] area but across the UK as well.'</i> (Ppt1)
				Short term (operational) work	<i>'I think a lot of the time the operational side is important to the day to day running.'</i> (Ppt7)
				Long-term (strategic) work	<i>'Unless you give yourself time to step away and properly plan for that strategic role, nothing ever moves on in a bigger, idealistic, research-based way.'</i> (Ppt7)
	<b>Subtheme: Contextual influences on SENCo experiences</b>	Subtheme descriptor: Factors impacting individual SENCo experiences in meeting those demands	SENCos wear many hats in school	<i>'I'm SENCo, I'm also a class teacher, and deputy head.'</i> (Ppt4)	
			Challenge of protecting SENCo time	<i>'It's quite challenging sometimes. So I normally have non-contact time all day Friday and that's kind of combined PPA SENCo deputy head time, obviously SENCo then I'm out at different times of the year doing annual reviews or observations or attending other meetings so that's kind of as and when needed.'</i> (Ppt4)	
			SENCo working patterns	<i>'I work 4 days. I mean, that's not to say that I'm part time, I probably do what's described as 'squeezed working', or something like that, so there isn't somebody who then picks up the 20 percent of this week that I don't work for.'</i> (Ppt7)	
			Firefighting (reactive responses)	<i>'When you're in school, you're racing, from one thing to another, and sometimes it can feel a bit like you're firefighting constantly.'</i> (Ppt5)	
			The SENCo role is lonely	<i>'I think it's a it's a lonely job at times. You are the only person in your school completing that role.'</i> (Ppt7)	
			Sense of individual responsibility	<i>'You're the only one in the school and the pressures can be quite overwhelming sometimes.'</i> (Ppt4)	
			SENCos are leaving the profession	<i>'I'm part of so many Facebook Forums of SENCos, and SENCos are constantly walking away from the job because it's so demoralizing at times.'</i> (Ppt1)	

## Appendix I - Yardley's quality criteria for research credibility, reliability & trustworthiness

*Table: Summary of steps taken to address Yardley's (2015) quality criteria*

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>How this is addressed in the present study</b>
Sensitivity to context	<p>Participant demographic and professional background data collected to provide the reader with understanding of the unique case study context.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researcher observations of group SENCo supervision sessions were conducted, outside the data collection phases (1, survey and 2, interviews) to provide greater insight into the different group dynamics and models of supervision used by individual EP facilitators.</li> <li>• Reflexive practice observed throughout to consider positionality of researcher and observer, not otherwise involved in supervision groups though reflecting on possible impact of dual role held as a Trainee EP in the local EP Service.</li> </ul>
Commitment & Rigour	<p>Commitment to topic and promoting research with SENCo professionals through research planning, special interest work around SENCo supervision through placement practice and identification of advisory participants.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of research measures (such as an online survey tool and semi-structured interview schedule) in collaboration with advisory participants and informed by existing research literature.</li> <li>• Development of research measures (such as an online survey tool and semi-structured interview schedule) were piloted with an advisory participant providing feedback to ensure questions and research tools are relevant and informed.</li> <li>- 'Cognitive testing' of survey tool prior to dissemination - a technique used to test and improve survey questions by administering and getting participant feedback on the cognitive processes they go through in answering the questions to identify any issues with those questions to make recommendations for improvements.</li> <li>- Conducting pilot interview and seeking advisory participant feedback on the provisional interview schedule to improve question clarity, scope and timings as required.</li> <li>• Member checking of thematic analysis findings with advisory SENCo participants to ensure they were reflective of participant experiences.</li> <li>• Ongoing use of reflective research and professional supervision to facilitate a rigorous approach to research, methodological planning and interpretation of findings.</li> </ul>
Coherence & Transparency	<p>Use of a research approach consistent with underpinning epistemological and ontological position.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence of rationale behind methodological process and stages of research procedure clearly outlined to the reader, with relevant</li> </ul>

	<p>additional materials (such as ethics application form, information sheet and consent form) included in Appendices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisory participant feedback sought on the clarity and accessibility of the online survey and interview questions.</li> <li>• Interview participants were given a copy of the interview schedule ahead of their interviews.</li> <li>• Member checking of thematic analysis findings.</li> <li>• The researcher recognises their own interpretation of participant responses and interaction with the supervisory space as a factor in the construction of themes from the data.</li> <li>• Reflexive approach considered throughout (see reflexive journal extracts in Appendix E) and clearly included in research writing.</li> </ul>
Impact & Importance	<p>This research (informed by wider background literature and models) responds to current gap in the evidence around experience of group supervision by school SENCoS and their perception of related impact.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The research highlights the professional voice of SENCoS.</li> <li>• Research recognises the multifaceted (and isolating) role of the SENCo isolating, addresses the need for supervisory support in the school role (anecdotally recognised by SENCo and EP professionals) and presents an opportunity for SENCoS to come together from different school settings, supporting knowledge exchange and awareness of a professional support network.</li> <li>• Evaluation of EP Service offer forms a graduated approach to quality assurance at a Local Authority Service level.</li> </ul>
Triangulation	<p>Use of different methodologies and means of explanatory data collection in sequential 2-phase process to broaden understanding and build on research questions and findings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examples of raw data (quotes), themes and coding are included in Appendix H for the reader.</li> <li>• Member checking of emerging themes with participants allows for feedback on the construction of themes and external reflection on interpretation of findings, within the reflexive process.</li> <li>• A disconfirming case analysis was conducted to consider survey data that does not fit within emerging thematic frameworks, discussion of and reflections on which is shared in written reporting.</li> </ul>

## Appendix J – Participant Information Sheet

Exploring the lived experiences and impact of school SENCOs engaging with EP-led professional group supervision

# Information Sheet

My name is Megan von Spreckelsen and I am inviting you to take part in my research project: *‘Exploring the lived experiences and impact of school SENCOs engaging with EP-led professional group supervision.’* I am a trainee Educational Psychologist at the UCL Institute of Education which has a long history of high quality educational research, informing impactful policy and improving outcomes in relevant areas of professional practice. I am on placement in X [currently anonymised but will be filled in when circulating among participants] Educational Psychology Service for years 2 and 3 of my professional training (from 2021-2023).

This information sheet is designed to give you more information about the research project. Please read the following information carefully and retain the information sheet for your records. If there is anything that is unclear, or if you require any additional information, do not hesitate to me.

If you have any further questions about this research, prior to or following participation, please contact me at [megan.spreckelsen.20@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:megan.spreckelsen.20@ucl.ac.uk). After reading this information sheet, if willing to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm agreement. Please remember that participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time.

### **Who is carrying out the research?**

Researcher: Megan von Spreckelsen [megan.spreckelsen.20@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:megan.spreckelsen.20@ucl.ac.uk)

Lead Supervisor: Rosanne Esposito [r.esposito@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:r.esposito@ucl.ac.uk)

### **Why are we doing this research?**

This research project aims to gather the perspectives of SENCOs engaging in professional SENCO supervision groups – *‘Exploring the lived experiences and impact of school SENCOs engaging with EP-led professional group supervision.’*

Against a back drop of Covid 19 which has involved fragmented educational experiences for all and significant increase in SEND needs, this research explores how SENCOs who are front line staff can be supported. This project aims to explore insights provided by SENCOs about the experience of receiving group professional supervision with a view to identifying features of ‘best practice’ to inform the

development of professional supervision practice and future service delivery in this area. SENCOs participating in supervision groups represent an important professional stakeholder group in relation to understanding the barriers, facilitators and impact around interprofessional supervision and the development of systemic EP practice in a Local Authority Service context.

**Why am I being invited to take part?**

We are inviting SENCOs that are currently engaging in EP-led SENCO supervision groups which are offered as part of the traded offer from the Educational Psychology Service in their Local Authority. In the first phase, we invite these SENCOs to share their perspectives on and experience of group professional supervision with other SENCOs in their local area by answering an online questionnaire, which we are currently in the process of developing. In the second phase, a sample of participating SENCOs will also be invited to participate in subsequent individual interviews to provide more in-depth insight and experiences on EP-led group supervision with other SENCOs in the local area.

**Do I have to take part?**

Participation in this activity is completely voluntary. There are no anticipated risks in taking part in this project, however if you begin to feel uncomfortable in any way, you have the right to withdraw at any time without any further explanation. We hope that if you do choose to be involved then you will find it a valuable experience.

**What will happen if I choose to take part?**

With your agreement, you will be asked to participate in a 20-25 minute online survey (Phase 1) and may be contacted to arrange a 20-30 minute follow-up interview via Microsoft Teams (Phase 2). The survey and interview will consist of questions about your experience and perspectives on professional supervision. Participants will be asked to please answer as openly and as honestly as possible. In phase 2, at the end of the interview there will be an opportunity for a 5 minute debrief with me, if required, where I can signpost you to the appropriate services or your link group EP should there be anything triggered that requires further support or clarification.

**Benefits of participation:**

The benefits would include improved professional understanding of how SENCOs can be best supported through supervision and more systemic opportunities for interprofessional collaboration, beyond direct EP work with individual SENCOs and CYP in schools. Your participation would also contribute to the training and development of trainee EPs, as well as informing best practice for supervisory support among qualified EPs and other professional teams or services in Local Authority systems. It is hoped that trainees, EPs and other educational professionals will also gain through hearing these broader insights into current

perceptions and lived experiences of interprofessional supervisory practice, as measured by an appropriate questionnaire and individual interviews.

**Will anyone know I have been involved?**

The interview will be recorded and transcribed to ensure advice can be effectively implemented following the interviews. The interview transcripts and online survey data will be fully anonymised and any information that could lead to the participant being identified will also be removed.

**Data Protection Privacy Notice**

The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk). This 'local' privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information from research studies can be found in our 'general' privacy notice for participants in research studies here.

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices. The lawful basis that will be used to process any personal data is: 'Public task' for personal data. We will be collecting personal data such as: 'number of years you have worked as a SENCo'.

All data will be anonymised during the data collection stage and prior to storage. All anonymised transcripts, audio and survey data will be stored in password protected files that will be stored on secure UCL systems. These encrypted files will not be accessible to anyone but the researchers.

If you would like to receive a summary report of the project findings, you will be asked to include your contact details on the consent form. Your personal details will be stored separately from your interview data.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at [dataprotection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@ucl.ac.uk).

**Contact for further information**

If you have any further questions before you decide whether to take part, you can reach me at [megan.spreckelsen.20@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:megan.spreckelsen.20@ucl.ac.uk).

If you would like to be involved, please complete the following consent form and proceed to complete the online questionnaire by [e.g., end of June 2022] and provide contact details for scheduling of possible follow-up online interview, to be conducted between [e.g., September to mid October 2022].

This project has been reviewed and approved by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this information sheet.

## Appendix K – Participant Consent Form

### Exploring the lived experiences and impact of school SENCos engaging with EP-led professional group supervision

#### Participant Consent Form

If you are happy to participate in this study please complete this consent form by ticking each item, as appropriate, and return to the research team via the contact details below:

If you would only like to participate in Phase 1 of this research, please tick boxes 1-5. If you consent to be contacted to participate in an online interview for Phase 2, please tick boxes 6-8.

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet, and have had the opportunity to consider the information, contact the researcher to ask questions, and have had any questions adequately answered (and have their contact details if wanting to ask further questions). Yes  No
  
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. Yes  No
  
3. I know that I can refuse to answer any or all of the questions and that I can withdraw from participating in the survey or interview at any point. Yes  No
  
4. I agree that small direct quotes from responses may be used in reports and that these will be anonymised. Yes  No
  
5. I understand that in exceptional circumstances anonymity and confidentiality would have to be broken, for example, if it was felt that practice was putting children at risk, or there were concerns regarding professional misconduct. In these circumstances, the appropriate school and local authority safeguarding protocols and channels would be followed. Yes  No
  
6. I consent to be contacted with a view to arranging an individual follow-up interview via Microsoft Teams. Yes  No   
If yes, please provide your preferred email address here: \_\_\_\_\_
  
7. I understand that I am consenting to be contacted about arranging an interview but that I can withdraw consent at any time. Yes  No
  
8. I agree for the interview to be audio recorded, and that recordings will be kept secure and destroyed at the end of the project. I know that all data will be kept under the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Yes  No

Participant Name:.....

Signature: ..... Date: .....

Name of researcher: Megan von Spreckelsen

Signature: ..... Date: .....



## Appendix L - Research Ethics application form

# Doctoral Student Ethics Application Form

Anyone conducting research under the auspices of the Institute of Education (staff, students or visitors) where the research involves human participants or the use of data collected from human participants, is required to gain ethical approval before starting. This includes preliminary and pilot studies. Please answer all relevant questions in simple terms that can be understood by a lay person and note that your form may be returned if incomplete.

### **Registering your study with the UCL Data Protection Officer as part of the UCL Research Ethics Review Process**

If you are proposing to collect personal data i.e. data from which a living individual can be identified **you must be registered with the UCL Data Protection Office before you submit your ethics application for review**. To do this, email the complete ethics form to the [UCL Data Protection Office](#). Once your registration number is received, add it to the form\* and submit it to your supervisor for approval. If the Data Protection Office advises you to make changes to the way in which you propose to collect and store the data this should be reflected in your ethics application form.

*Please note that the completion of the [UCL GDPR online training](#) is mandatory for all PhD students.*

## Section 1 – Project details

- a. Project title: [Exploring the lived experiences and impact of school SENCos engaging with EP-led professional group supervision](#)
- b. Student name and ID number (e.g., ABC12345678): [Megan von Spreckelsen SN: 20196877](#)
- c. **\*UCL Data Protection Registration Number:** [Z6364106/2022/04/87](#)
  - a. Date Issued: [21.04.2022](#)
- d. Supervisor/Personal Tutor: [Mrs Rosanne Esposito \(Academic supervisor\) & Dr Frances Lee \(EP supervisor\)](#)
- e. Department: [Psychology and Human Development](#)
- f. Course category (Tick one):  
PhD   
EdD   
DEdPsy
- g. **If applicable**, state who the funder is and if funding has been confirmed.
- h. Intended research start date: [01/04/2022](#)
- i. Intended research end date: [31/08/2023](#)

- j. Country fieldwork will be conducted in: [England](#)
- k. If research to be conducted abroad please check the [Foreign and Commonwealth Office \(FCO\)](#) and submit a completed travel risk assessment form (see guidelines). If the FCO advice is against travel this will be required before ethical approval can be granted: [UCL travel advice webpage](#)
- l. Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?

Yes

External Committee Name:

Date of Approval:

No  **go to Section 2**

**If yes:**

- Submit a copy of the approval letter with this application.
- Proceed to Section 10 Attachments.

**Note:** Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the [National Research Ethics Service](#) (NRES) or [Social Care Research Ethics Committee](#) (SCREC). In addition, if your research is based in another institution then you may be required to apply to their research ethics committee.

## Section 2 - Research methods summary (tick all that apply)

- Interviews
- Focus Groups
- Questionnaires
- Action Research
- Observation
- Literature Review
- Controlled trial/other intervention study
- Use of personal records
- Systematic review – **if only method used go to Section 5**
- Secondary data analysis – **if secondary analysis used go to Section 6**
- Advisory/consultation/collaborative groups
- Other, give details:

Please provide an overview of the project, focusing on your methodology. This should include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, data collection (including justifications for methods chosen and description of topics/questions to be asked), reporting and dissemination. Please focus on your methodology; the theory, policy, or literary background of your work can be provided in an attached document (i.e. a full research proposal or case for support document). *Minimum 150 words required.*

#### *Purpose & Aim of the research:*

The purpose of this research project is to investigate how professional group supervision, facilitated by EPs, is experienced by school SENCOs. The aim is to explore its impact on professional practice and SENCO well-being, and identify possible systemic (e.g., school-level) facilitators and barriers to engagement.

#### *Background*

This research aims to understand the experiences of SENCOs who have engaged with professional supervision while working in educational settings to support the special educational needs of and positive outcomes for children and young people.

School staff wellbeing in particular is a growing area of concern due to the unprecedented impact of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of staff in schools (Teacher Wellbeing Index, 2021). Educational Psychologists play a key role in promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing at an organisational level in school communities (MacKay and colleagues, 2016; 2019). Exploring the impact of professional supervision on school staff's practice, wellbeing, and school systems is timely to build resilience and optimise capacity in school pastoral systems. These insights are particularly relevant to EP Services looking to inform provision of interprofessional supervision, for example as part of a traded EP service offer to schools.

Exploration of the views of professional supervisees across primary and secondary school contexts in a shire Local Authority is therefore a relevant area of research to inform the use of interprofessional supervision and consider its impact as part of systemic EP work.

This case study cohort provides an opportunity to explore the lived experiences of SENCOs who have experienced EP-led supervision. This will provide valuable insight into the perceptions of supervisees outside of the EP profession as to the impact of interprofessional supervision on their practice and wellbeing.

#### *Main research questions:*

3. What are the system-level factors that support group supervision?
  - *What structures, processes and characteristics did SENCOs think best supported their experience of professional supervision?*
4. What is the impact of supervision on professional practice, outcomes and, SENCO wellbeing?

- *How has professional group supervision impacted the professional and personal wellbeing of participating SENCOs?*
- *What mechanisms or processes do SENCOs identify as 'best practice' in professional supervision to best support their practice as SENCOs and positive outcomes for CYP with SEND?*
- *Does access to supervision improve SENCOs' understanding of their own professional roles and that of EPs?*

*Participants:*

All participants will be adult professionals working in educational settings: Inclusion Criteria: Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) from primary and secondary schools across one shire county who are currently engaging in group SENCO supervision facilitated by EPs from their Local Authority EP service.

*Sampling:*

- Participants will be SENCOs working in school settings in England that are engaged in group supervision in one Local Authority context.
- Recruitment will employ purposive sampling via two professional cohorts engaging in supervision to which the researcher has a professional link.
- Case Study sampling will involve purposive recruitment for participation in an online survey and individual online interviews from a cohort of SENCOs attending group supervision in the academic year 2021-2022, as part of their traded offer from the local EP Service.
- A case study sample will be recruited from a cohort of 102 School SENCOs which have enrolled in group supervision offered by the Local Authority EP Service in the academic year of 2021-2022. These SENCOs have been allocated into 13 EP-led groups of around 8 SENCOs. The researcher understands current attendance of group supervision sessions can range from 3-7 SENCOs per session.
- This research aims to recruit as many SENCOs as possible for the online survey (at least 30) and interview at least one SENCO from each supervision group (N>13) to gain insight from different SENCO supervision groups.

*Research design:*

This 2 phase sequential mixed methods exploratory research will gather insight from survey data and individual interview responses about the experiences of school staff receiving professional supervision in a case study cohort of SENCOs participating in EP-led SENCO supervision groups across the school year. This allows for relevant exploration of systemic barriers, impact on professional practice and wellbeing in different educational settings. This research will use a mixed methods approach, taking a social constructivist perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1994; Burr, 2003) to explore the multiple truths and experiences shared by individual professionals to help inform the researcher's analysis of themes and subsequent implications for practice and understanding of what works in terms of professional supervision. During Phase 1 of the research, data will be collected from an online survey conducted among school staff who are engaging with supervision. This survey will be disseminated

across a group of school SENCOs who are engaging in EP-facilitated group supervision with other SENCOs in their local area. The online questionnaire will include both quantitative items with closed questions and fixed response options, as well as qualitative items allowing open responses.

Phase 2: Consent will also be sought for follow-up contact (Phase 2) in the form of semi-structured telephone or online interviews (or in person if preferred by the participant) to clarify understanding of qualitative answers and gather more in-depth qualitative data about their experiences of supervision and perceived impact. The semi-structured nature of these interviews allows for exploration of the broad research questions with flexibility in responding to points shared during individual interviews. Participants will be assured in both information sheet and consent form that consenting to follow-up contact by researchers would only relate to this research project so their details would not be used for any further purposes beyond this study.

For quantitative data collected in response to questionnaire items with closed answer options, descriptive frequency statistics will be reported. For data collected from responses to qualitative questionnaire items and during follow-up in-depth interviews, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) will be used to identify key themes within responding professionals' views, highlighting common features of 'best practice' experienced by SENCOs.

#### *Method of data collection:*

Online surveys (Phase 1) and individual interviews (Phase 2) will be used within the data collection. Participants will be offered interviews that are conducted by phone, online or in person as is most convenient and comfortable for them. In addition to being robust to possible changes in covid restrictions, online survey data collection from a professional sample will minimise risk of delay and data loss associated with completing, posting or collecting of physical surveys and reducing travel time demands that would have been incurred to deliver/collect survey materials, thereby optimising participant availability for engagement with the initial data collection phase and giving them the option to choose remote or in person for the second phase with interviews.

#### *Piloting:*

Purposive sampling will be used to recruit 2 SENCOs in the Local Authority area to advise with online survey to check for accessibility, coherence and engagement. Semi-structured interview questions will be developed from the themes that are elicited from phase 1. The 2 pilot advisory SENCOs will also be approached for cognitive testing of interview question content and to inform accurate representation of time requirements for final participants.

#### *Phase 1: Online surveys*

It is envisaged that the online surveys will take 20-25 minutes to complete and semi-structured interviews will be up to 30 minutes long, given the demands on participant time (as sample-specific concerns about professional capacity for participation is a consideration). However, the inclusion of inversed questionnaire items or answer scales will be used to provide a measure of participant engagement and internal consistency reliability (to assess the consistency of results across items within the questionnaire). Please see the attached documents for draft online survey questions.

## Phase 2: Online interviews

Individual interviews will be completed with school SENCOs. This will involve meeting one-to-one with participants remotely, either through Microsoft Teams or over the telephone. Individual interviews will be semi-structured to allow flexibility to explore varying individual responses around a set list of topics. The interviewer can therefore gather qualitative data around a specific area of focus while also having the freedom to adapt the sequencing of questions, the exact wording and amount of attention given to different topics (Robson, 2011) as appropriate to the individual interview.

Interviews will be audio-recorded using password protected and encrypted equipment. This will enable me to transcribe and securely store the interview data in preparation for analysis.

The researcher will use an interview schedule as a guide that will serve as a broad checklist of topics to be covered and default wording and provisional order of questions. Questions will be developed based participant online survey responses from Phase 1 of the research around the specific research questions of interest.

Please see the attached documents for the provisional semi-structured interview schedule and questions.

### *Reporting and dissemination:*

The results of this research will be written into an interim summary research report in 2022 and as a thesis in 2023, submitted as part of Doctoral Training requirements. The anonymised results may also be reported in a professional summary report of the findings or additional journal publications. A document summarising the key findings will also be shared among participants who provided consent and contact details to receive this.

## **Section 3 – Research Participants (tick all that apply)**

- Early years/pre-school
- Ages 5-11
- Ages 12-16
- Young people aged 17-18
- Adults please specify below
- Unknown – specify below
- No participants

**Note:** Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the [National Research Ethics Service](#) (NRES) or [Social Care Research Ethics Committee](#) (SCREC).

## **Section 4 - Security-sensitive material (only complete if applicable)**

Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances; concerns terrorist or extreme groups.

- a. Will your project consider or encounter security-sensitive material?  
Yes\*  No
- b. Will you be visiting websites associated with extreme or terrorist organisations?  
Yes\*  No
- c. Will you be storing or transmitting any materials that could be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts?  
Yes\*  No

\* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

## Section 5 – Systematic reviews of research (only complete if applicable)

- a. Will you be collecting any new data from participants?  
Yes\*  No
- b. Will you be analysing any secondary data?  
Yes\*  No

\* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

*If your methods do not involve engagement with participants (e.g., systematic review, literature review) and if you have answered **No** to both questions, please go to **Section 8 Attachments**.*

## Section 6 - Secondary data analysis (only complete if applicable)

- a. Name of dataset/s:
  - b. Owner of dataset/s:
  - c. Are the data in the public domain?  
Yes  No
- If no, do you have the owner's permission/license?*
- Yes  No\*
  - d. Are the data special category personal data (i.e. personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation)?  
Yes\*  No
  - e. Will you be conducting analysis within the remit it was originally collected for?

Yes  No\*

f. **If no**, was consent gained from participants for subsequent/future analysis?

Yes  No\*

g. **If no**, was data collected prior to ethics approval process?

Yes  No\*

*\* Give further details in Section 8 Ethical Issues\**

*If secondary analysis is only method used and no answers with asterisks are ticked, go to Section 9 Attachments.*

## Section 7 – Data Storage and Security

**Please ensure that you include all hard and electronic data when completing this section.**

a. Data subjects - Who will the data be collected from?

Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) working in educational settings across a shire county Local Authority in the South East of England (see Section 3) who are engaging in a SENCO supervision group facilitated by an EP in their LA EP service. The involvement of these SENCOs in these supervision groups is commissioned as part of the traded service offer provided by the EP service and taken up by the SENCOs' schools.

b. What data will be collected? Please provide details of the type of personal data to be collected

Online survey data and data gathered during audio recorded online interviews (conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams or over the telephone) from participants regarding their engagement with professional supervision processes alongside their work in a local authority setting in the South East of England. Personal data collected (to be anonymised) will include participants' gender and number of years spent working in SENCO role.

**Is the data anonymised?**

Yes  No\*

Do you plan to anonymise the data?

Yes\*  No

Do you plan to use individual level data?

Yes\*  No

Do you plan to pseudonymise the data?

Yes\*  No

*\* Give further details in Section 8 Ethical Issues*

c. **Disclosure** – Who will the results of your project be disclosed to?

Analysis and results will be discussed with Academic Supervisor, Mrs Rosanne Esposito and Educational Psychology supervisor, Dr Frances Lee. Anonymised results will be written up into interim and final thesis reports and possibly subsequent articles for publication, accessible to professional and public audiences.

**Disclosure** – Will personal data be disclosed as part of your project?

No.



(‘No’ if this question refers to ‘raw’/identifiable personal data but ‘yes’ if referring to personal data that has been anonymised as there will be some personal/demographic data gathered/shared when describing the participant sample, anonymised at whole sample level, e.g., X female, age range/number of years in SENCo role.)

- d. Data storage – Please provide details on how and where the data will be stored i.e. UCL network, encrypted USB stick\*\*, encrypted laptop\*\* etc.

\*\* *Advanced Encryption Standard 256 bit encryption which has been made a security standard within the NHS*

Data will be stored in a secure, password protected folder on the researcher’s encrypted laptop and IOE personal drive.

- e. **Data Safe Haven (Identifiable Data Handling Solution)** – Will the personal identifiable data collected and processed as part of this research be stored in the UCL Data Safe Haven (mainly used by SLMS divisions, institutes and departments)?

Yes  No

- f. How long will the data and records be kept for and in what format?

The data (anonymised survey responses, anonymised interview transcripts and participant contact details provided for arranging interviews) will be kept in a secure, password protected folder on an encrypted laptop and IOE personal N drive. In accordance with UCL ethics and data storage regulations, data will be kept and stored securely on this personal encrypted and password protected laptop until the completion of the researcher’s doctoral course (31/08/23) and on the N drive for 10 years.

Will personal data be processed or be sent outside the European Economic Area? (If yes, please confirm that there are adequate levels of protections in compliance with GDPR and state what these arrangements are)

No

Will data be archived for use by other researchers? (If yes, please provide details.)

No

- g. If personal data is used as part of your project, describe what measures you have in place to ensure that the data is only used for the research purpose e.g., pseudonymisation and short retention period of data’.

Participants will be anonymised within the research, e.g., ‘SENCo 1’. Should participants use the names of people or organisations, these will be anonymised (e.g., organisation X, colleague Y) to protect their identities.

\* *Give further details in Section 8 Ethical Issues\**

## Section 8 – Ethical Issues

Please state clearly the ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research and how will they be addressed.

**All** issues that may apply should be addressed. Some examples are given below, further information can be found in the guidelines. *Minimum 150 words required.*

- Methods
- Sampling
- Recruitment
- Gatekeepers
- Informed consent
- Potentially vulnerable participants
- Safeguarding/child protection
- Sensitive topics
- International research
- Risks to participants and/or researchers
- Confidentiality/Anonymity
- Disclosures/limits to confidentiality
- Data storage and security both during and after the research (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection)
- Reporting
- Dissemination and use of findings

### Informed consent

All participants will be provided with information sheets to read and consent forms to complete prior to their involvement in the study to ensure a system of informed, opt-in consent. This means participants will be required to give their written consent to participate with each of the online survey and interview, having received information fully outlining the purpose and plan for the research. At the beginning of the semi-structured interviews, participants will also be reminded of the information sheet contents and invited to confirm verbal consent to participating in the interviews and for them to be recorded. Prior to beginning the survey and interviews, all participants will be made aware that they have the right to withdraw their consent for any reason to participate in the research until interview data has been anonymised and transcribed for analysis, this will be one term after data collection.

### Confidentiality and anonymity of data

Data will be anonymised from the outset to ensure confidentiality and protect the identities of the participants. Any people or organisations (e.g., school settings) discussed by the participants during interviews will also be pseudonymised to protect their identities. Participants will be informed of this in the initial stages of participant recruitment. Data will be stored securely with password protection and encryption so that it cannot be accessed by anyone other than me and my supervisor.

### Data storage and security both during and after researching (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection)

Data will initially be collected on a secure, password protected and encrypted laptop before being transferred to the secure UCL network. Data will be anonymised from the outset to protect the identity of participants. A separate password-protected spreadsheet containing a record of participant ID will be used until analysis of interview transcript data and survey data is complete in case clarification of individual survey responses is relevant during interview.

Should the laptop be stolen, the encryption will prevent any documents or data from being accessed. In accordance, with UCL ethics and data storage regulations, data will be kept and stored securely for 10 years.

#### Reporting and dissemination of findings

Findings will be shared in a doctoral report and subsequent thesis with all participant data completely anonymised to prevent identification. Any wider publication of the findings at the end of the research project, for example in academic journals, would also only contain fully anonymised data from which participants could not be identified. A summary document outlining the key findings (also fully anonymised) will also be offered to participants who can specify if they would like to receive a copy when the research has concluded (and relevant contact details given with consent at that stage).

#### Safeguarding

As is explained to participants in the information sheet prior to participation, this research will follow school safeguarding protocols and processes if there is a safeguarding issue that is raised, for example in during an interview.

#### Sensitive topics

A 5 minute debrief will be offered at the end of phase 2 interview where any sensitive issues or concerns can be signposted accordingly or to the EP group lead as appropriate.

Please confirm that the processing of the data is not likely to cause substantial damage or distress to an individual

Yes

## **Section 9 – Attachments.**

*Please attach your information sheets and consent forms to your ethics application before requesting a Data Protection number from the UCL Data Protection office. Note that they will be unable to issue you the Data Protection number until all such documentation is received*

- a. Information sheets, consent forms and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research (List attachments below)

Yes  No

Submitted (as separate attachments) with research proposal:

Information sheet outlining information about both the online survey and follow-up interview phases of the research project.

Consent form covering both online survey and follow-up interview participation.

Online questionnaire - Draft question items for online survey

## Semi-Structured Interview Schedule – Draft questions and prompts

- b. Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee Yes
- c. The proposal ('case for support') for the project Yes
- d. Full risk assessment Yes

## Section 10 – Declaration

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge the information in this form is correct and that this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of this project.

I have discussed the ethical issues relating to my research with my supervisor.

Yes  No

I have attended the appropriate ethics training provided by my course.

Yes  No

### I confirm that to the best of my knowledge:

The above information is correct and that this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project.

Name [Megan von Spreckelsen](#)

Date [14/03/2022](#)

**Please submit your completed ethics forms to your supervisor for review.**

## Notes and references

### Professional code of ethics

You should read and understand relevant ethics guidelines, for example:

[British Psychological Society](#) (2018) *Code of Ethics and Conduct*

Or

[British Educational Research Association](#) (2018) *Ethical Guidelines*

Or

[British Sociological Association](#) (2017) *Statement of Ethical Practice*

Please see the respective websites for these or later versions; direct links to the latest versions are available on the [Institute of Education Research Ethics website](#).

### Disclosure and Barring Service checks

If you are planning to carry out research in regulated Education environments such as Schools, or if your research will bring you into contact with children and young people (under the age of 18), you will need to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) CHECK, before you start. The DBS was previously known as the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). If you do not already hold a current DBS check, and have not registered with the DBS update service, you will need to obtain one through at IOE.

Ensure that you apply for the DBS check in plenty of time as will take around 4 weeks, though can take longer depending on the circumstances.

### **Further references**

Robson, Colin (2011). *Real world research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner researchers* (3rd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.

This text has a helpful section on ethical considerations.

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

This text has useful suggestions if you are conducting research with children and young people.

Wiles, R. (2013) *What are Qualitative Research Ethics?* Bloomsbury.

A useful and short text covering areas including informed consent, approaches to research ethics including examples of ethical dilemmas.

## **Departmental Use**

If a project raises particularly challenging ethics issues, or a more detailed review would be appropriate, the supervisor must refer the application to the Research Development Administrator via email so that it can be submitted to the IOE Research Ethics Committee for consideration. A departmental research ethics coordinator or representative can advise you, either to support your review process, or help decide whether an application should be referred to the REC. If unsure please refer to the guidelines explaining when to refer the ethics application to the IOE Research Ethics Committee, posted on the committee's website.

Student name: [REDACTED]

Student department: [REDACTED]

Course: [REDACTED]

Project Title: [REDACTED]

### **Reviewer 1**

Supervisor/first reviewer name: Rosanne Esposito

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?

No

Supervisor/first reviewer signature:

Date: 30<sup>th</sup> March 2022

### **Reviewer 2**

Second reviewer name: Dr Frances Lee

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?

No

Second reviewer signature:

Date: 14.03.2022

### **Decision on behalf of reviewers**

Approved

Approved subject to the following additional measures  
Not approved for the reasons given below  
Referred to the REC for review

Points to be noted by other reviewers and in report to REC:

█

Comments from reviewers for the applicant:

█

***Once it is approved by both reviewers, students should submit their ethics application form to the Centre for Doctoral Education team: [IOE.CDE@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:IOE.CDE@ucl.ac.uk).***