

Special educational needs/disabilities and the evolution of the primary school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) in England

(Reviewed paper)

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Abstract: *This review paper presents the evolving role of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) in mainstream primary schools set within the changing political/ideological National Educational landscape in England.*

Keywords: *Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO), primary school*

1 Introduction

The SENCO's role is, in the main, forged through compliance with legislation which creates their 'legal contract', this forms the core duties and responsibilities which they must do within their schools. However, this key school role cannot be generalised across all English primary schools due to the diversity and types of primary school existing, the differing priority placed on supporting and developing provision for special educational needs and disability by individual Head-teachers and the SENCOs' differing conditions of service according to this priority. While a general overview of the SENCOs' role, based on their duties as presented through the latest Code of Practice on Special Educational Needs (DfE/DH, 2015) is possible, a true picture of a primary school SENCO requires an in-depth and longitudinal study in order to identify and critically reflect upon the complexity and diversity of their individual working lives.

2 Aims

The purpose of this review paper is to provide an overview of the role of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) in an English mainstream primary school; it is designed to present a model for further comparative study with provision for

special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and the leadership/management of this provision in other international contexts.

3 Methods

In order to achieve this purpose, this review paper locates the English SENCO in the context of their evolving role from that of Remedial Teacher to their current status of leaders within their schools. This current status, as defined through three national Codes of Practice on Special Educational Needs (DfE, 1994; DfES, 2001 and DfE/DoH, 2015), identifies the SENCO as a manager, an administrator and a teacher with the potential to be an agent for strategic change by acting as a transformational leader; this potential either being empowered or restricted by their own knowledge of special educational needs and disabilities, their vision for developing provision for SEND in their schools, the amount of delegated responsibility given to them by their Head-teachers and the requirements of a national high-stakes assessment and inspection regime which influences the ethos and culture of their individual schools in relation to the priority placed on the provision made for children with barriers to their learning.

The field of special education in England is a wide and fluid one in that it is constantly being re-assessed, re-structured and re-imagined through waves of legislation, statutory guidance, media commentary and research. Although the first Department for Education (1994) *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* was instrumental in formalising/structuring the core role of the SENCO, earlier literature, research and legislation provided the first steps to this formalisation; hence the importance of the *Warnock Report* (1979) as the 'seed' from which the mature SENCO 'tree' grew.

The SENCO has his/her main body of work in the field of special educational needs, but this is not exclusively so as a SENCO can also have a significant role across the whole school, particularly in terms of developing a school's drive to become an inclusive learning community and in the continuing professional development of their colleagues (teachers, teaching assistants and other school staff members). In this context it is important to first define what is meant by an English mainstream primary school because it is in this professional space where the SENCO role exists. It is also important to define the phrase 'special educational needs' as this area provides the professional, vocational, pedagogical and theoretical field in which SENCOs operate as specialists and practitioners. In this review paper, the evolving SENCO role is explored through this dual definition set within a discussion, informed by literature, focusing on the nature of the SENCO role in its current format as structured by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) endorsed (2009) *National Award for SEN Coordination* learning outcomes and the statutory guidance

of the Department for Education/Department for Health's (DfE/DH) (2015) *Code of Practice: 0 to 25*.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Setting the Context: The English Primary School

In England, it is commonly accepted that a mainstream primary school is the first stage of formal education. Children are usually admitted from the ages of five years old through to eleven with some schools being divided into infant and junior levels (Gov.uk, 2016). The infant age range is from age five to seven and equates to Key Stage One of the National Curriculum for England and Wales, whilst the junior age range equates to Key Stage 2 of the National Curriculum. *The Education Act* (1996) stated that primary education means:

- a) Full-time or part-time education suitable to the requirements of children who have attained the age of two but are under compulsory school age.
 - b) Full-time education suitable to the requirements of junior pupils of compulsory school age who have not attained the age of 10 years and six months; and
 - c) Full-time education suitable to the requirements of junior pupils who have attained the age of 10 years and six months and whom it is expedient to educate together with junior pupils within paragraph (b).
- (Chapter 56. Part 1. Section 2. p. 2)

The Education Act (1996) included pre-school age children in its overall definition of primary education, children whose education is usually met in pre-school or Foundation settings. It is at the end of Key Stage 2, when the pupils are in Year 6, that National Curriculum Standardised Assessment Tests (SATs) are taken. For this review the focus is on the SENCO role as it is performed in a primary school setting with pupils aged from five to eleven (National Curriculum Key Stages 1 and 2), excluding the pre-school/Foundation stage. An overview of the English Education System is provided through the following table:

Table 1: *The English State Education System*

NC KS 1 (Pupils aged between 5 and 7 years old)			NC KS 2 (Pupils aged between 8 and 11 years old)				NC KS 3 (Pupils aged between 12 and 14 years old)			NC KS 4 (Pupils aged between 15 and 16 years old)		NC KS 5 (Pupils aged between 17–18)	
Foundation	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12	Year 13
PRIMARY SCHOOL							SECONDARY SCHOOL						
Infant			Junior									6 th Form	
					MIDDLE SCHOOL		MIDDLE SCHOOL						
ALL-THROUGH SCHOOLS (there is a growing trend for some Academies to adopt an 'all-age' profile and intake – from Foundation through to the end of compulsory education at KS 5)													

The Primary focus is shown emboldened with 'NC KS' representing the National Curriculum Key Stage. The age ranges of the pupils shown do, in reality, have a cross-over into the next Key Stage as there are pupils who will still be 7 years of age at the beginning of KS 2, 11 years of age at the beginning of KS 3 and 14 years of age at the beginning of KS 4, this being due to where their date of birth falls during the traditional academic year which the majority of schools adopt according to the timings of national assessments, pupil intakes and transitions.

a) The Complexity of Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Special Educational Needs in English schools has had a long history and evolution. *The Education Act* (1944) originally established that children's education should be based on their age and ability with eleven categories of 'handicap' being used to label the needs of children with perceived barriers to their learning. These categories included, for example, 'delicate', 'blind', 'maladjusted' and 'educationally sub-normal' (Ministry of Education, 1944). The term 'Special Educational Needs' was introduced in the *Warnock Report* (Department for Education and Science (DES) 1978) to move away from this overly medical classification/categorisation of pupils and terminology as originally used in the 1944 Act.

Warnock considered the complex meaning of 'handicap' in an educational context in her Report and stated that:

...we called attention to a wide range of things which a child needs to learn as part of his education. Besides his academic studies he must learn, for example, how to accommodate himself to other people. He must also learn what will be expected

of him as an adult. Any child whose disabilities or difficulties prevent him from learning these things may be regarded as educationally handicapped... There is no agreed cut and dried distinction between the concept of handicap and other related concepts such as disability, incapacity and disadvantage.
(p36)

Warnock further stated that it was impossible to establish any precise criteria for defining what constitutes 'handicap' as the idea of two categories of children (the handicapped and the non-handicapped) was so deeply entrenched in educational thinking at the time, with those deemed to be handicapped requiring special education, and the non-handicapped 'ordinary education'. Warnock called for a more positive approach and highlighted that the complexities of individual needs were far greater than this dichotomy implied; this idea was presented through the adoption of the concept of Special Educational Need (SEN) which related to the whole child – abilities as well as disabilities plus factors which had a bearing on a child's educational progress – rather than a deficit 'handicapped' model with its focus on a child's disabilities only. There was a clear message that all children needed to be viewed holistically, not by any labelled condition, and that their needs should be met within the mainstream school. The 1978 Warnock Report proved to be a milestone in the history of education particularly relating to the creation and development of school provision for pupils with SEN and the creation of the contemporary SENCO role in its embryonic form.

A year after the Report's publication a Conservative government, with Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, returned to power. Two years later, the Warnock Committee's recommendations formed the basis of the 1981 *Education Act* which gave parents new rights in relation to special needs, urged the integration of children with special needs into mainstream classes and introduced the concept of 'statementing' for children with special needs with entitlement to support and funding. However, although this was radical for the time and far-reaching in terms of generating positive change for pupils with special educational needs, thirty years later in 2006 Warnock herself described the system she had been instrumental in creating as being 'needlessly bureaucratic' and called for the establishment of a new enquiry. Warnock commented on the very limiting nature of grouping all pupils into a single, named category (SEN) regardless of the nature of their individual need or area of difficulty. Warnock stated that:

One of the major disasters of the original report was that we introduced the concept of special educational needs to try and show that disabled children were not a race apart and many of them should be educated in the mainstream... the

unforeseen consequence is that SEN has come to be the name of a single category, and the government uses it as if it is the same problem to include a child in a wheelchair and a child with Asperger's, and that is conspicuously untrue. (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006. p. 16)

The idea that SEN is a single category creating a range of problems associated with conceptualising the continuum of need without a more explicit understanding (Ekins, 2012) had been further complicated by the varied use of the terminology across the range of services engaging with pupils and families where the language of special needs frequently became over-complicated and exclusive, generating significant consequences around confused communication between the services and the general understanding of a child's need. This over-complication and confusing use of language was identified by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) (2010) who stated that,

The language of special educational needs has become highly contentious and confusing for both parents and professionals. Health services refer to 'disabled' children; social care services to 'children in need'; education to 'special educational needs', or, after the age of 16, to 'learning difficulties and/or disabilities.' The children and young people may find themselves belonging to more than one of these groups but the terms do not mean the same thing and they have different consequences in terms of the support that the young person will receive. (OFSTED, 2010. p. 8)

OFSTED noted that the legislation around SEND was far reaching with a, 'tendency to add to rather than replace what is already there' (OFSTED, 2010. p. 59). However, previous to OFSTED's commentary, some measures were taken in order to provide clarity for the parents of children with SEN. Established as a response to the October 2007 House of Commons Education & Skills Committees' report on Special Educational Needs: Assessment and Funding, the *Lamb Inquiry into Special Educational Needs and Parental Confidence* (Department for Children, Families and Schools (DCFS), 2009) chaired by Brian Lamb, reviewed and explored a range of approaches where parental confidence in the SEN assessment process could be enhanced. Lamb commented on the inconsistency of SEN practice:

Throughout the Inquiry one of the most striking features of the SEN system has been the variation that we have seen. We have seen widely varying levels of parental confidence and there is variation at local authority level in the wide range of different indicators: from overall levels of SEN and the SEN-non-SEN attainment gap, to levels of exclusions, the number of statements issued and the time in which they are issued. (p. 52)

In connection with these variations, OFSTED (2010) reported that the term SEN had been over-used and was too often applied to pupils who did not have a special educational need at all. This view was supported by Florian (2010) who stated that,

When students who encounter difficulties in learning are identified as having 'special educational needs,' an intractable cycle is formed – students are assigned membership of the group because they are judged to possess the attributes of group membership, and they are believed to have the attributes of the group because they are members of it.

(p. 65)

There had been increases in the numbers of pupils identified with SEN, from 10% of all pupils in 1995 to 18.2% of all pupils in 2010 (Department for Education, 2011) along with changes in the nature and range of the areas of need. The Department for Education (2011) identified that the term 'SEN' was associated with pupils falling behind in learning and achievement rather than with having a specific educational need thus resulting in groups within the overall school population being over-represented, such as pupils with SEN being more than twice as likely to be eligible for free-school meals, 'Looked-After-Children' being three-and-a-half times more likely to be assessed as having SEN compared to other children and summer-born children who had been assessed as having a 60% greater chance of being identified as having SEN than those children born in September of the same intake year.

Ekins (2012) believed that the frequent identification of such flaws called for radical reform of the system (p 32), this supported previous calls for reform which noted a significant need for improvement and change. The Department for Education (2011) used this variability in practice to plan for a series of reforms aiming to create a,

radically different system to support better life outcomes for young people; give parents confidence by giving them more control; and transfer power to professionals on the front line and to local communities.

(p. 4)

This commitment eventually led to the publication of the DfE/DH (2015) *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice for 0 to 25 years*. This new Code built on the earlier definition of SEN presented in the Education Act (1996) and the Department for Education and Skills' (2001) *Code of Practice* where it was stated that children had special educational needs if they had a learning difficulty which called for special educational provision to be made for them which was additional to, or different from, general educational provision made available for children in the school. The DfE/DH (2015) Code includes an additional statement which recognises

the broad definition covering young people from 0-25 years of age and that where a child/young person has a disability or health condition which requires special educational provision to be made, they will be covered by the SEN definition with the Code clearly referencing the legal obligations that schools and local authorities have towards children and young people who are disabled under the *Equality Act* (2010).

It is within this field of complex and detailed debate around the medical, social, psychological, economic, ideological and political nature of special educational needs that the SENCO operates, with questions on the nature of learning difficulty and how it results in a special educational need being at the core of a SENCO's understanding (Edwards, 2016). The next section of this review paper focuses on the evolution of the SENCO role in the context of this complexity, the challenges of defining special educational needs and the lack of clarity around their work in schools.

4.3 Defining the Role and Professional Identity of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO)

The DfE/DH (2015) *Code of Practice 0 to 25* states that in an English school the SENCO has the day-to-day responsibility for the operation of SEN policy and the coordination of specific provision made to support individual children with SEN. In this role, the SENCO acts as the agent for their Head-teacher and board of governors who hold the responsibility for the overall management and quality of that provision within their school. The SENCO is also engaged with the Head-teacher and governing body in determining the strategic development of SEN policy and provision in the school. The *Code* makes it clear that, 'They will be most effective in that role if they are part of the school leadership team' (p. 97) and that Governing bodies of maintained mainstream schools and the proprietors of mainstream academy schools (including free schools) '**must** ensure that there is a qualified teacher designated as SENCO for the school' (DfE/DH, 2015. p. 97). It is interesting to see the emphasis (as indicated through their use of bold text) that the Department for Education and Department for Health place on the SENCO being a qualified teacher. A direction is also made that if the appointed SENCO in the school has not previously been the SENCO at that or any other school for a total period of more than twelve months they '**must**' achieve a National Award in Special Educational Needs Coordination within three years of appointment.

National standards-based training was not a new concept as the Teacher Training Agency published a set of National Standards for the teaching profession in 1998 which were then used by a variety of higher-education providers to create the learning outcomes for specific courses targeted at SENCO professional development. These National Standards for SENCOs (Teacher Training Agency (TTA), 1998) listed the following areas of SEN coordination: The strategic direction and development for

the provision to support pupils with special educational needs within the school; leading and managing staff; the effective development and deployment of staff and resources, and teaching and learning.

As National Standards for SENCOs were not new, neither was the requirement for schools to appoint a SENCO to coordinate provision for pupils with SEN as this had existed since the adoption by all state funded schools of the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (1994) *Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Pupils with Special Educational Needs*. In their position within the school, the SENCO became central to the provision, procedures, funding and practices related to meeting the needs of pupils with SEN. The current DfE/DH (2015) *Code of Practice 0 to 25* has built upon this range of responsibilities in the light of significant change by stating that all schools must ensure that there is a qualified teacher designated as SENCO and that the SENCO has sufficient time and resources to carry out their role. All maintained schools, academies and free schools accept that they have responsibilities for special needs and that someone has to be named as their SENCO (Cowne et al, 2015). However, primary school SENCOs were already, before the introduction of the 2015 Code, full or part-time teachers and these SEN coordination responsibilities were additional to their normal class-teaching work-load (Wall, 2006; Rose, & Howley, 2007). This was a multi-faceted role which usually resulted in a busy SENCO trying to balance their varying responsibilities. This dual identity is difficult to define as the SENCO job and role are both embedded within the identity of the SENCO as first and foremost a teacher, albeit a teacher having a specialist remit within the school with a linked wide-ranging portfolio of responsibilities for the day-to-day management of provision for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. However, this is not just specific to SENCOs as other teachers in primary schools combine a range of duties such as subject coordinators with their whole-class teaching commitments.

The terms 'job' and 'role' are often used interchangeably but there are arguments defining their difference: Armstrong (1997) defined a job as consisting of a group of finite tasks to be performed and duties to be fulfilled in order to achieve an end result, whereas a role described the part played by people in meeting their objectives by working effectively within the context of the organisation's objectives, structures and processes. The concept of a role is much wider as it is people and behaviour-orientated and is concerned with what people do (beyond the group of finite tasks allocated to them) and how they do it rather than concentrating narrowly on the job content. Hogg and Vaughn (2008) expanded this idea further by stating that roles represented a division of labour, furnished clear-cut expectations, provided information on how people within an organisation related to one another and furnished those in a role with self-definition and a place within that organisation. In this way, Armstrong (1997) stated that people at work were enacting a role and, through their

own interpretation and perceptions of how to behave within their work context, performed effectively within their situation. The SENCO role can, therefore, be defined through its inter-relation with being both a teacher and through being a school leader, someone who is both line-managed and who manages others.

For SENCOs there is a potential conflict within this multi-role as a teacher and a leader. The role contains the specific responsibilities and requirements of the job and what somebody holding it should or should not do. Boddy (2011) defined management as the activity/process of getting things done with the aid of people and resources, with a role in this case becoming the sum of the expectations that other people have of a person occupying a position, 'other people' in the SENCO case being fellow teachers, school managers, the pupils themselves, parents and external services/professionals. However, the 'job' of the SENCO is not defined only by others as the attitude of the SENCO to their job (whole and in parts) is a key factor as, according to Curtis and Curtis (1995), attitudes help to shape a person's behaviour at work providing a basis for expressing their values and helping them to adapt to their work environment. Davis (1989) stated that there is a need to understand this kind of 'multiple positioning that any person takes up in their day to day life' (p. 8) in an attempt to conceptualise the relation between each individual's day-to-day existence and social structures. In effect the *role* of the SENCO is determined by the key managerial and administrative duties and responsibilities outlined in the succession of Codes of Practice (DES 1996, DfES 2001 and DfE/DH 2015) and then finely tuned through the adoption of the learning outcomes and criteria as set out in the compulsory TTA (2009) National Award for SEN Coordination then further interpreted through the perceptions and expectations of other people (colleagues, parents, pupils, external services etc.). The *job* of the SENCO is determined by their different school contexts and direction from Head-teachers and line-managers set above the SENCO in the hierarchy of the school with the SENCO acting as teacher, administrator, manager and managed with both role and job changing according to the fluidity of special educational needs in relation to changing legislation and their schools' needs. This situation, to some extent, reflects the attitudes and beliefs of the society of that era (Soan, 2005) with the SENCO's attitude being affected by factors such as the nature of the work, their own individual needs and the school culture relating to the way things are done, the organisational structure/hierarchy and their own place within it (Curtis and Curtis, 1995). The nature of this type of change was identified by Shuttleworth (2000) who observed that the SENCO role encompassed more than being good at the job and that:

...it is a matter of joining the ranks of an army of dedicated professionals who have left the minimal Code of Practice definition far behind and who are now exercising real influence over the curriculum...

(p. 2)

Farrell (2001) questioned the specialist role of the SENCO as *The National Standards for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators* (TTA, 1998) presented principles of good teaching which applied to all teachers and pupils. Beyond the core purpose of the SENCO and the outcomes of SEN co-ordination and the *professional knowledge and understanding, skills and attributes* (Farrell, 2001, p. 75) there were statements in the TTA 1998 Standards which Soan (2005) identified as being relevant for every teacher but with the role and responsibilities of the SENCO changing in many schools in order to complement the developing inclusion agenda. Soan further stated that,

‘The core purpose remains the same in essence, but the practical aspects of the role are altering in line with developing teacher expertise and individual children’s needs. SENCOs have, during the last decade, been the conduits of knowledge and support in the field of SEN, helping individual pupils with SEN and staff in mainstream environments adjust to the changes demanded, first from integration and now inclusion policies. Bureaucracy and workload pressures undoubtedly have also influenced the rethinking of the responsibilities of a SENCO.’

(p. 31)

Soan concludes her discussion with a key question: ‘Is this role becoming a ‘dinosaur’, outstaying its usefulness, or is it going to survive as long as inclusive practice fails to be fully implemented?’ (p. 31)

Garner (2009) strengthened the concept of the evolving SENCO when he identified that in many (but certainly not all) schools, the SENCO was a member of the school’s senior leadership team and was able to influence strategic planning and policy decisions; that it was this aspect of the SENCO role which had created a significant move away from the coordination function to a more leadership-orientated one. However, twelve years before this, Crowther (1997) identified the range of the SENCOs’ work and the different conditions they had in their varied schools before Garner noted the movement from coordination to leadership. Although the generic role title was the same, Crowther noted that the responsibilities of their role and the resources individual SENCOs had at their disposal to effectively realise this role were very different:

SENCOs work in a very wide range of contexts. Some have no dedicated time for their work and manage few resources; others are full-time SENCOs managing large teams of teachers and assistants and have a responsibility for a significant budget.

(p. 1)

Although now ‘historical’, the resonance of this statement still reverberates and still applies to the current situation for a significant number of SENCOs in their schools as there appeared to have been very little, if any, change over twenty years. Where

significant change did occur was in the requirement for SENCOs to successfully complete a programme of National training at Master's Degree Level as it became, in 2011, a Central Government requirement for new SENCOs to participate in compulsory training based upon a series of SEN Coordination criteria in order to be confirmed in their status. This created a new group of professionals as the 'traditional' educational landscape related to inclusive theory and practice changed along with the orientation of their management/leadership role.

Educational change in policy and practice continued as the previous Coalition (Conservative and Liberal Democrat) Government (2010-2016) followed by the current Conservative Government presented their ideology underpinned by a 'rolling back' of Local Authority influence through giving greater autonomy to individual Head-teachers and the forced establishment of Academies/Academy Trusts and Free Schools which determine their own curricula and conditions of service for teachers. This continuing change contributed to the reforms in the SENCO role which have occurred since the DfES (2001) *Code of Practice*, culminating in the recent requirements for SENCOs to have accredited status, although the central core of the SENCOs' responsibilities remained the same. With the emphasis on Head-teachers and Academy Trust Chief Executives determining the ethos/philosophy of their individual schools and/or group of schools the SENCO role, no matter how well defined through new legislation and national policy, was ultimately dictated by the views and priorities of their Head-teachers, school governing bodies or Academy Trust CEOs. In short, SENCOs must comply with their school's ethos even if the school's senior leadership team has a low priority for meeting the needs of children with SEND/developing special provision or in establishing an inclusive learning community.

The management of the DfE/DH (2015) *Code of Practice: 0 to 25* graduated approach to special educational needs created the core of a SENCO's 'Legal Contract', this being the key elements within the Code which SENCOs *have* to address according to legislative and statutory guidelines. This consists of a process of identifying, assessing and analysing children's needs; SENCOs and teachers (working in partnership with parents) planning adjustments and then putting in place effective interventions and provision with the teacher remaining responsible for working with the children on a daily basis but with the SENCO supporting/advising the class teacher on the implementation of provision. The SENCO plays a key part in reviewing the effectiveness of the support and interventions, with children holding an Education and Healthcare Plan (EHC) which is formally reviewed every twelve months. This graduated approach created the stages that children progress through on the way to having their personal needs fully met and crafted the core of SENCOs' duties, along with the planning and preparation for transition planning for children with SEND. The 2015 *Code* stated that SENCOs should be aware of the local offer

for the provision of pupils with special educational needs as provided by the Local Authority and school and that they should work with other professionals in order to support families, making sure that children with special needs received support and high-quality teaching (DfE/DH, 2015. 6.89). The key components of effective communication and successful liaison/partnership working had been previously identified nearly twenty years ago by Cowne (1998) who stated that SENCOs needed to develop excellent listening skills to participate in productive dialogues. To be able to listen and to participate in these dialogues the Teacher Training Agency stated that SENCOs required the attributes of confidence, enthusiasm, reliability, flexibility and good communication skills (TTA, 1998).

But what does a contemporary English primary school SENCO actually ‘do’ in 2019? The 2015 Code lists the key responsibilities of the SENCO as follows:

- Overseeing the day-to-day operation of the school’s SEN policy;
 - Co-ordinating provision for children with SEN;
 - Liaising with the relevant Designated Teacher where a looked after pupil has SEN;
 - Advising on the graduated approach to providing SEN support;
 - Advising on the deployment of the school’s delegated budget and other resources to meet pupils’ needs effectively;
 - Liaising with parents of pupils with SEN;
 - Liaising with early years providers, other schools, educational psychologists, health and social care professionals, and independent or voluntary bodies;
 - Being a key point of contact with external agencies, especially the local authority and its support services;
 - Liaising with potential next providers of education to ensure a pupil and their parents are informed about options and a smooth transition is planned;
 - Working with the Head-teacher and school governors to ensure that the school meets its responsibilities under the Equality Act (2010) with regard to reasonable adjustments and access arrangements;
 - Ensuring that the school keeps the records of all pupils with SEN up to date.
- (DfE/DH, 2015, p. 97–98)

5 Conclusion

In the light of this range of responsibilities, Edwards (2015) stated that, ‘The SENCO role is huge! (p. 28), but these responsibilities only list the procedural and ‘legal contract’ expected of SENCOs and does not reflect on how the role is interpreted and moulded in each individual school irrespective of the Code or the compulsory

SEN Coordination Award learning outcomes. This makes any attempt to create a ‘generic’ SENCO model or any precise definition which is designed to capture the full extent of the role and the job redundant in the end. Thus, any reflection on what a contemporary SENCO *does* and what their role *is* cannot be properly made without a detailed critical exploration of their diverse range of duties, their different working practices, their own specialist knowledge of special educational needs and disabilities, their unique professional/personal experiences, individual school priorities, differing conditions of service, their support from school leaders and colleagues and the degree of autonomy given to them by their Head-teachers and governors for them to act as transformational leaders across the whole school community. As Edwards did correctly state, the SENCO role is, indeed, ‘huge’!

Postscript

In this review paper, the point is forcibly made that the field of Special Education in England is constantly being re-assessed, re-structured and re-imagined. Most of this re-structuring is through the ideological influences of a succession of political parties (both Left and Right wing) being in Government; each ‘new’ Government generally making significant changes to the legislation, policies and guidelines set out by the previous Government. The field of Special Education in England only mirrors the general situation for educational policy as a whole; one example of political/ideological intervention in this context is the frequently changing name of the Government department responsible for national educational policy. In this review paper the different names used for the department are mentioned several times in relation to legislation and guidance; in order to maintain clarity, and to maintain the provision of a general overview for comparative purposes, the following table is provided:

Table 2: Overview of Government Education Department Nomenclature (according to political party in office) 1976 to 2019

Year(s)	Title for the Education Department	Government	Prime Minister	Examples of Milestones (directing national policy for SEND in England and impacting on provision for SEND in schools)
1964 to 1979	The Department for Education and Science (DfES)	1974 to 1979 Labour	Harold Wilson (1974 to 1976) James Callaghan (1976 to 1979)	• 1977–78 Warnock Report (<i>The term ‘Special Educational Needs’ first used</i>)

1979 to 1992	The Department for Education and Science (DfES)	1979 to 1997 Conservative	Margaret Thatcher (1979 to 1990)	• 1981 Education Act (<i>Warnock Report is 'activated'; the role of the 'SENCO' is established</i>) • 1988 The Education Reform Act (<i>Introduction of the National Curriculum, OFSTED inspections, local management of schools, SATS and school league tables</i>) • 1993 Education Act (<i>Promoted the education of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools</i>)	
1992 to 1995	The Department for Education (DfE) then...		John Major (1990 to 1997)		• 1994 (<i>the first</i>) Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of SEN (<i>Role of SENCO made mandatory</i>) • 1994 UNESCO Salamanca Statement (<i>A call for international action on Inclusion for all children and adults</i>)
1995 to 1997	The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)				
1997 to 2001	The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)	1997 to 2010 Labour	Tony Blair (1997 to 2007)	• 1998 SENCO Standards (<i>A set of non-compulsory standards for the role of SENCO established</i>) • 2001 (<i>the second</i>) Revised Code of Practice (<i>Increased parental & pupil involvement in decision-making. Improved administration of identification and provision for SEND</i>) • 2001 Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) (<i>Strengthened rights of parents & pupils to access mainstream education. Included 'reasonable steps' & practical advice for including pupils with disabilities</i>) • 2003 Every Child Matters (ECM) (<i>Introduced agency collaborative working. Working towards social as well as educational inclusion</i>) • 2004 Removing Barriers to Achievement – the Government's Strategy for SEN (<i>A sustained programme of action supporting integrated services and provision for all</i>)	
2001 to 2007	The Department for Education and Skills (DfES)		Gordon Brown (2007 to 2010)		

			• 2004 Children Act <i>(The legal framework for the above programme of reform – with a focus on vulnerable children)</i> • 2006 Primary Review <i>(Recommendations made for future policy on SEN)</i> • 2006–2020 Vision: The Children Plan <i>(Focus on the development of 'personalised/differentiated learning')</i>
2007 to 2010	The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)		• 2007 The Inclusion Development Programme (IDP): A part of the National Strategies <i>(Materials designed to improve the skills & knowledge of teachers: strategies for pupils with SEN– Dyslexia; Social/Emotional & Behavioural Difficulties, Speech/Language & Communication Needs and Autistic Spectrum Disorders)</i> • 2008 The Berrow Report <i>(A series of recommendations on transforming provision for children and young people with Speech/Language and Communication Needs (SLCN))</i> • 2008 The Education (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators: England) Regulations <i>(A SENCO is now required</i> – <i>To be a qualified teacher</i> – <i>To complete an induction period under regulations made under section 19 of the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998</i> – <i>To be working as a teacher at a school)</i> – <i>To successfully attend a compulsory national qualification at Master's Degree Level)</i> • 2008 The Lamb Inquiry: Special Educational Needs and Parental Confidence <i>(51× Recommendations made on improving the identification, assessment and meeting individual needs)</i> • 2010 The Equality Act <i>(Reviewed the 2001 Disability Discrimination Act and structured all equality-related legislation into one)</i>

				• 2010 Improving Parental Confidence in the Special Educational Needs System: An implementation plan (<i>All 51 of Lamb's 2008 recommendations were accepted and implemented</i>)
2010 to 2019	The Department for Education (DfE)	2010 to 2014 Coalition (Conservative/Liberal Democrat) then 2014 to 2019 Conservative	David Cameron (2010 to 2014) David Cameron (2014 to 2016) Teresa May (2016 to 2019)	• 2010 OFSTED: The Special Educational Needs and Disability Review (a statement is not enough) (<i>Report commissioned to evaluate how well the legislative framework and arrangements serve children & young people with SEN</i>) • 2014 The Children and Families Act (<i>Reformed legislation relating to children and young people with SEND</i>) • (2014) Reformed in 2015 (<i>the third</i>) Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (<i>Joint Department for Education and Health providing statutory guidance for organisations that work with, and support, children and young people with SEND</i>)

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