The Influences on the English mainstream primary school Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in a quasi-market led national educational system

(overview essay)

Andrew Smith

Abstract: *This paper reflects on the role of the English primary school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) through a political perspective which explores how SENCOs function in their schools within an increasingly market-led Education system with its high-stakes national assessment regime and the growth of Academies and Free Schools which sit outside of Local Authority responsibility and influence. The concepts of 'performativity', 'control' and the SENCO as 'leader' are discussed.*

Keywords: *Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO), primary school, quasi--marketplace, performativity, leadership*

1 Introduction

This review paper follows on from a previous paper on the English primary school Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) (Smith, 2020) and is designed as a companion piece. Its focus is on the role of the SENCO at work and the varied cultural and political influences which impact upon their performance and ability to do their job in leading provision for learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in their schools; this is interrelated with the nature of employment relationships affecting motivation and commitment as the SENCO acts and performs their role within the complex organisational system and performativity-rich culture of their school which is itself highly influenced by the long-established marketization of Education nationally. This review paper draws upon a range of literature and sources which are historical in nature, however the critical commentary and observations within these sources do have a direct relevance and influence on the current culture and climate in English primary schools.

1.1 Aims

The purpose of this review paper is to further explore the role of the English mainstream primary school Special Educational Needs Coordinator but in the context of their working conditions and the ways in which their role as a leader is perceived and enacted across a variety of primary schools. This paper is primarily designed as a model for further comparative study, however it is researched and presented through a political lens which underpins the reviewer's position and, as such, it is open to critical interrogation and commentary.

2 Methods

a) Revisiting the role of the SENCO

The DfE/DH (2015) Code of Practice 0 to 25 states that the 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' (p. 97). The SENCO has the day-to-day responsibility for the operation of the school's Special Educational Needs (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 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; this award being at post-graduate (national level 7) status which is accredited by a university or Higher Education Institution (HEI).

The requirement for schools to appoint a SENCO to coordinate provision for pupils with SEN has 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 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; this multi-faceted role 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 embedded within the identity of the SENCO as, first and foremost, a teacher. However, this is not just specific to SENCOs as other teachers in primary schools also combine a range of duties with their whole-class teaching commitments.

b) Exploring the SENCO role within the construct of a Market-led Economy (schools in the 'quasi-marketplace)

The SENCO is engaged with the Headteacher and governing body in determining the strategic development of SEN policy and provision in the school. The DfE (2015) Code of Practice makes it clear that, 'They will be most effective in that role if they are part of the school leadership team' (p. 97). In this respect (the SENCO as a leader) there is an inconsistency between the experiences of SENCOs across schools as some are supported and encouraged to develop as strategic leaders whilst others are not, instead they become managers and administrators with restricted leadership responsibilities as the school's Headteacher, or Chief Executive if the school is a member of an Academy Trust (or equivalent), makes and takes all the key strategic decisions. This, in part, is due to the sustained pressure upon schools to improve pupil performance against national targets and to become more financially sustainable in a climate where Education has become a 'quasi-marketplace' with a greater decentralisation of powers to schools and an increasing emphasis on standards, accountability and competition. Scott (1998) stated, in the language of a pure market-led organisation, that,

> 'The effectiveness of market-controlled organizations is directly determined by their customers: if their interests are satisfied, then they will continue to supply the inputs required by the organization; if not, then they can withhold their contributions, causing the organization to suffer and perhaps ultimately to fail.' (p. 99)

With schools in the quasi-marketplace the customers referred to by Scott equate to parents, with schools being in competition for these customers. Bush and Bell (2006) stated that the expectation imposed upon schools to act in this competitive, market--driven manner has increasingly created school leaders who have to meet narrowly imposed targets and face penalties, 'including dismissal, if they do not succeed' (p. 13) with head-teachers and senior educational managers being particularly vulnerable to such negative effects.

The SENCO role has been interpreted as having a leadership function in every Code of Practice since 1994, thus the evolution of the SENCO into a school leader is significantly influenced by the informal cultures of their individual schools and how this culture has been moulded by the market-led forces within a globalised system

of performativity-led education. It is in this context of the school in the marketplace that the SENCO role is next explored.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 The 'Quasi-Marketization' of Schools through Party Political Reform

This paper is not focused on the changing nature of the English school system, but it is important to briefly explore the increasing marketization of schools as this phenomenon underpins performativity and holds together the varied influences impacting on the SENCO and how he/she does their job. This marketization stemmed, in the main, from the 1988 Education Reform Act which became legislation under the Thatcher Conservative Government. This act created the local management of schools (LMS), schools with Grant Maintained Status (GMS), per-capita funding and league tables of standard assessment tests (SATs) results, alongside greater parental choice and a rolling-back of Local Authority control and support. Post-1988 schools were encouraged to opt-out of Local Authority control due to being given considerable financial incentives if they adopted full Grant Maintained Status with its direct funding from the government. West and Pennell (2002) stated that the Conservative reforms were designed to bring market forces into the school-based education system to make it more consumer-orientated with the emphasis on consumer choice anchored in an overarching belief in 'the superiority of market forces as a means of organising education and society generally' (p. 3)

Although Grant Maintained status was abolished by the 1998 School Standards Framework Act the financial situation of those schools was protected by what became known as 'transitional funding' and the growth, under the New Labour government's Technology Colleges Programme introduced in 1993, of a range of specialist schools with enhanced funding leading to the setting up of City Academies as public-funded independent schools with substantial private and voluntary sector sponsorship having to be in place where the aim was to replace schools that were failing or schools that needed 'an extra boost' (Times Educational Supplement, 2000). These significant changes in schooling underpinned the Conservative Party-led Coalition Government (from 2010–2015) and then Conservative-led Government (from 2015 to the present) political drive for increased academisation, the creation of Free-Schools and the continuingly re-surfacing arguments around the potential of re-establishing selective grammar schools.

Outside of the private/independent sector there are no direct official fees paid by parents for school places and so parents are not engaged in a commodities market as such but instead there is what has been called a 'quasi-market' (Le Grand and

Bartlett, 1993) where there was the potential to lead to 'popular' and 'unpopular' schools, over-subscription on pupil places and even discrimination against children with special educational needs and those from low-income or non-traditional family structures. Riddell (2005) identified how some middle-class parents would move location and/or hire private tutors to get their child into what was perceived as a good school through their interrogation of published league table results. Riddell made the point that these tactics widened the class divide as poorer and working-class parents could not afford to play the market in schools in these ways to the same extent. Browne (2007) noted that:

> 'A recent survey suggested that most parents are prepared to move house to get the catchment area of a good school. Many of those are prepared to pay higher house prices to do so, effectively buying a better state education.' (p. 11)

The idea for new schools fuelled the Conservative Party's drive for sanctioning Free Schools set up by groups of parents, education charities, philanthropists and trusts; Rikowski (2007) stated that this deepened the quasi-marketization of the school system by the 'creation of more schools with low or zero accountability'(p. 3) to the Local Authority. However, the impact of the quasi-marketplace in schools was not simply related to parental choice and the growth of school leadership into a business-orientated function, as schools 'market-shaped' job roles through the underpinning requirements of staff payment linked to pupil performance, frequent monitoring by both internal (school) processes and formal inspection by The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). This was accompanied by public and media exposure through the publication of pupil performance results which parents compared and contrasted. Garner, Hinchcliffe and Sandor (1995) made the key point that this compulsory scrutiny,

> '…has been underpinned by an apparent wish, on the part of central government, to reduce teacher autonomy and power. This is particularly apparent with respect to the taught curriculum which has become the property of successive Conservative governments. In the period after 1988, control and criticism of teachers were combined. Legislation was introduced to govern their training and work-practices, and it occurred alongside a systematic, orchestrated criticism of the profession, in which teachers' voices have been largely neglected, their opinions overridden, and their concerns dismissed.' (p. x)

According to this, now thirty-two-year-old view, schools and teachers had to comply with the legislation and systems set out for them and only recently have schools been allowed more freedom from direct government control but only by being a part of an academy trust, a free school or their equivalent.

3.2 Performativity and Conformity in Schools

The term 'performativity' was created by Lyotard (1984) in his thesis entitled 'The Postmodern Condition'; this concept was applied to the emphasis placed on the use of outcome-related performance indicators. In many respects this translates into the loss of opportunity for the 'teacher-voice' to be heard, together with a remaining central government control of the content of the curriculum, the high-stakes assessment regime and, to some extent, how the curriculum is taught in the classroom thus creating a level of performativity where teachers have been forced to comply with these imposed outcome-related structures. Garner, Hinchcliffe and Sandor (1995) continued their theme of diminished teacher autonomy by stating that teachers had not been given the opportunity to think about their work or were enabled to deliver teaching and learning activities in an alternative way to the expectations set by national strategies and the directives set by their head-teachers due to a fear of being identified as not complying with the government's accepted modus operandi and thus opened themselves to censure and disciplinary action. This fear identified by Garner et al., when writing under a Conservative government over thirty years ago, was also identified by Thring (1998) who, writing and researching at the time of the New Labour Government, stated that,

> 'Teachers' authority over curriculum and its management has been shamefully usurped, and in consequence we suffer a neutered powerlessness to effect change or have any influence over how it is imposed… Staffrooms now ring to the zombie reiteration of mantras issuing from our new directors of orthodoxy concerning standards, training and 'improvement', and a sinking sensation that whatever cannot be measured we should not be doing…Teachers have always been fundamentally social creatures, seeking consort with colleagues and harmony with their classes, but the recent policy of vilification by results is crushing teachers' individual vitality. Change in education is now propelled by abhorrence rather than compassion.' (p. 3–4)

Garner, Hinchcliffe and Sandor (1995) noted that this level of conformity and direction had to be acted upon and absorbed by all teachers, however those teachers working in the field of special education (particularly SENCOs) had to act upon/absorb all the general education directives in addition to those specifically targeted on, and around, pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. As a result teachers (and SENCOs) still had to perform and be assessed according to criteria into which they had little direct input apart from small-time frames where Green Papers were made available by central government for comment/response. Any real dialogue between the profession and central government did not exist and was not encouraged as those identified as questioning government policy and practice were called

'the new enemies of promise' by Michael Gove, the Conservative Party's Secretary of State for Education (Gove, M. 2013); in this context, Thring's description of teachers suffering a 'neutered powerlessness' had a particular resonance.

For the SENCO, the focus on the requirement to monitor pupil performance and achievement is a key part of the teaching process, however when this data collection becomes the self-fulfilling prophecy of the teaching process as defined by a regime of high-stakes, narrowly focused quantitative assessment which is then made public through the use of league tables and inspection reports this, according to Glazzard (2014), marginalises pupils who have barriers to their learning and/or participation. This performativity culture and mode of regulation created what Perryman (2006) called the process of 'performing the normal within a particular discourse' (p. 150); this could be interpreted as learning and teaching being enacted in a prescribed manner with school policies and documentation reflecting the expected discourse which is strongly influenced and formed by the emphasis on meeting pupil performance targets within financial constraints. Jeffrey (2002) particularly noted the link between this sort of performativity and the school as an organisation in the quasi-marketplace:

> 'A performativity discourse currently pervades teachers' work. It is a discourse that relies on teachers and schools instituting self-disciplinary measures to satisfy newly transparent public accountability and it operates alongside a market discourse.' (p. 1)

This adherence to rigid criteria is in direct opposition to the ideas of diversity rather than conformity and has a particularly detrimental impact on the work of those teachers and educators who would serve their pupils less well if they are forced into, what Firth (1998) called, a preconceived 'mould'; the mould in this case relating to set ways of working, teaching, communicating, structuring lessons and the reporting of pupil performance data. This performance-obsessed regime created the environment where teachers not conforming to this rigid set of criteria pertaining to pupil progress and levels of attainment were automatically considered to be non-effective. To be considered 'effective' these teachers were then carefully monitored and frequently assessed by headteachers with the aim of replicating the prescribed effectiveness factors in lesson planning, lesson delivery/teaching, pupil record-keeping and assessment as practiced across the school (Perryman, 2006). This had its links with normalization where any behaviour which is judged as 'normal' becomes the *only* acceptable behaviour with anything deviating from this norm being assessed and then judged as deviant. Hamilton (1997) made this link to education:

> 'There is, it appears, a plague on all our schools. Teachers have been infected, school organisation has been contaminated and classroom practices have become degenerative and dysfunctional. In short, schools have become sick institutions.' (p. 126)

Perryman (2006) linked this to assessment, appraisal, performance review and evaluation as teachers became agents and subjects of measurements. This was not only recognised in terms of school-based assessments only; Smith (2016) made a link to a global phenomenon which he believed was invasive in all areas of international education. Smith insisted that for over the past thirty years there had been a rapid expansion of embedded standardised testing linked to high-stakes outcomes with the use of assessment as a policy-tool being legitimised in order to measure education quality worldwide. Smith names this as a global testing culture which permeated all aspects of education from financing, parental involvement to pupil and teacher beliefs and practices where the reinforcing nature of this global testing culture led to a climate where standardised testing became synonymous with accountability which, in turn, was synonymous with education quality.

3.3 Increasing Teacher/SENCO 'Stress' and 'Burnout'

This highly pressurised culture has been identified with a noted increased level of stress in teachers and SENCOs. Pearson (2012) related a SENCO's comments on 'people leaving/feeling like they are not equipped to do the job'; this resonates with something that psychologists have identified as 'imposter syndrome' (Chittock, 2013) Impostor Syndrome is a temporary loss of confidence about a person's own ability to fulfil a role, although it is recognised that it is a temporary phase that often passes with the right kind of support from managers and colleagues. A study by MacBride (1983) explored the misconceptions of job burnout, a term describing a condition in which a person changes in his/her work situation from a state of high motivation and efficiency to apathy, inefficiency and may even demonstrate mild or severe psychological disturbance; these misconceptions included the belief that it was a sudden and dramatic happening which was inevitable in certain high-pressured professions. More gradual burnout was thought to be indicated by certain signals such as loss of job satisfaction, frequent sickness and minor medical ailments, interference with job performance and morale, gradual loss of confidence and deteriorating productivity accompanied by depression. Brill (1984) suggested that stress could lead to burnout but not all who were stressed became victims; a burnout victim being someone who had functioned adequately for a time in their job but who would not recover to previous levels of high performance without outside help or environmental rearrangement. MacBride's list of burnout symptoms are supported by Lowenstein's (1991) symptoms of teacher burnout which included such feelings as physical, emotional and attitudinal exhaustion, leading to irritability:

> 'Others include feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, disenfranchisement as well as somatic states of physical exhaustion including proneness to accidents and increased susceptibility to illness. To these may be added a sense of guilt, depression, a feeling of disorganisation, shock, volatile emotion and loneliness.' (p. 12–13)

Some of the commentaries made by SENCOs in other research echo this picture of a teacher under considerable stress. Beeby (2013) collected the narratives of SENCOs who reported on the sheer scope and scale of their work with rising pupil numbers on their schools' SEN lists – particularly those with speech, language and communication and emotional/social needs – and the demands of liaising with external agencies and with parents/carers all exacerbated by their increasing administrative load and the amount of support they had to give to fellow teachers and to teaching assistants. Beeby said, of her own experience as a SENCO and the pressures of working in partnership with parents and with her colleagues in her school, that

> 'Every parent can only see their own child's needs; each colleague is focussed on the pupils currently in his/her class and every outside agency is pushing its own agenda…We have responsibilities to all our pupils and sometimes the demands made by parents and others involved with a particular child becomes impractical or even unreasonable – it actually feels as though there are aspects of their responsibility that they would rather we take on.' (p. 9)

This is an authentic SENCO's 'voice' which gives weight to Drifte's (2005) observation that many SENCOs feel that they have, '…drawn the short straw, have been pushed in at the deep end and are totally overwhelmed by the enormity of their responsibilities' (p. xiii). These demands could also be viewed as fuelling the pressure of a performativity-driven ethos with the potential to stifle imaginative approaches and risk-taking when leading special educational needs provision in their schools. However, 'burnout' does not only affect teachers who have been in the profession for a length of time, Goddard et al. (2006) made the key point that a great deal of the past research into 'burnout' has concentrated on populations of established workers and not into 'entry-level' populations. Although having a level of teacher experience, newly appointed SENCOs can be interpreted as being classified as entry-level into this new and complex post. Fimian and Blanton (1987) compared burnout between less and more experienced teachers and discovered that burnout rates were almost identical; this type of finding challenges the normally perceived wisdom that burnout takes a degree of time to develop and that it is unlikely that it will happen at the beginning (or close to the beginning) of a teacher's career, in this case a significant number of established teachers taking up new positions as SENCOs may enter this role already feeling some of the effects of teacher burnout.

3.4 The Professional Identity of the SENCO

Most headteachers of primary schools would say that they are generally engaged in considering the implications of staff relationships in order to enable a community of learning in their schools, this is so that all members of staff (regardless of status)

work in a collaborative and supportive partnership with each other; however, Lee (2014) highlighted the situation in modern work cultures which

> '…value toughness, but the downside is isolation and believing that asking for help makes you look weak. Too thin-skinned and you'll find robust feedback grinds you down, but if you convey zero vulnerability you'll easily convey the idea that you care little about how other people see you or how they feel.' (p. 4)

Lee continued by saying that leaders who revealed a little vulnerability were often the most respected. So this presents a difficult challenge for SENCOs, particularly if they are new, or fairly new, in post. They may understand the requirements of the DfE (2015) Code of Practice, how to develop and manage effective provision for pupils with barriers to their learning and engage with external professionals – in other words, the management function which is defined by performativity, but the skills required for leading learning and teaching, innovating and feeling confident to take risks may fall outside of their experience and may even be looked upon in their school as undesirable factors as they can tend to make assertive and knowledgeable professionals question and challenge the established norms. A SENCO who does this may be identified as a member of 'the blob', a phrase coined by Woodhead (2002) and further developed by Michael Gove, the former Coalition and Conservative Government Secretary of State for Education who applied it to what he termed 'the educational establishment' who opposed his ideas and policies (Robinson, 2014). This is leadership in relation to 'what matters' and requires the SENCO to consider their performance and influence not only in terms of the old educational establishment (as vilified by those such as Woodhead and Gove) but particularly against the challenges they set themselves in relation to innovation and the critical interrogation of the market-driven educational establishment in order to develop effective special educational needs provision in their schools, to enhance their own status and define their identity as strategic leaders able to influence others to drive forward provision for SEN across the school.

This created performativity is threaded through how SENCOs view their specialist role and their professional identity within that role; it can also be interpreted as one of the threats which impact on SENCO autonomy, status and scope. However, there is an important counter-argument which needs to be recognised; this counter--argument accuses teachers themselves of not actively engaging with government guidance, policy and legislation during any consultation stage where their voice and views were being honestly sought, leaving it to their head-teachers and governors to do this whilst their teaching staff took up a far more passive role. This concept of teachers adopting a passive role and not 'stepping up' and actively engaging and/or innovating beyond the minimum requirements of their job is explored through the framework where the SENCO role can described according to the two hemispheres of

their role, their Legal Contract and their Psychological Contract. The Legal Contract for a SENCO is formally presented and set by the DfE/DH (2015) Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs: 0 to 25, complemented by the outcomes of the DCSF (2009) National Award for SEN Coordination. This provides SENCOs, aspiring SENCOs and their head-teachers with a defined field of work which forms their Legal Contract. The formal role of the SENCO according to this Legal Contract is outlined in the first review paper on SEN and the evolution of the primary school SENCO in England by Smith (2020). However, what is important is that the school response and structure for leadership across the range of vulnerable groups of pupils identified (in the Code) is well managed, well led, and collaboratively shared across the whole school. It is also identified that the SENCO is expected to provide professional guidance to colleagues and to work closely with staff, parents/carers and with other agencies; the SENCO should also be aware of the services provided by external providers/organisations and be able to work with other professionals providing independent support to families of children with SEND. However, once again, this was phrased as a 'should' rather than a 'must' in the Code, replicating the level of local interpretation which existed through all previous legislation and guidance relating to the SENCO role.

3.5 The SENCO's Psychological Contract

The Psychological Contract is the main driving force behind any teacher who sees beyond his/her own job description and, according to O' Donohue (2014), provides a well-established construct for 'better understanding the exchange that characterises the worker-organisation relationship' (p. 131) and the individual's subjective understanding of 'obligation-based exchanges with the organisation' (p. 131). The SENCO provides a significant cross-school function and their work is threaded through the successful application of a wide range of school policies beyond the remit of the policy for special educational needs and disability; thus the influence of the SENCO is felt across the whole school population and community and not just limited to implementing the practical application of the school's policy for SEN. This whole-school influence sits at the core of the SENCO's Psychological Contract and the opportunities to engage it.

Curtis and Curtis (1995) and York (1995) argued that human behaviour is based on needs, drives and aspirations and behaviour is caused by, and causes, these needs, drives and aspirations – that people do things because they need to (from necessity), feel driven towards them (pushed/urged in a certain direction) and aspire to a certain status (the desire). These are all concerned with motivation; for SENCOs this motivation could be designed to achieve necessities such as responsibility, recognition, status, higher pay and job satisfaction, although these motivational factors are common to many professions and areas of work and are not confined to SENCOs alone.

It is assumed that the characteristics, attitudes, features, dispositions and qualities which define a 'good' teacher such as enthusiasm, enjoyment, imagination and commitment are freely given by the vast majority of teachers and help create the 'buzz' perceived in the classroom and around the school community as a whole. These factors did not form a part of the Legal Contract for which a teacher was paid thus they formed the basis of the Psychological Contract. However, for SENCOs (and for all teachers), the delineation between Legal and Psychological Contracts is not clear-cut as the continuing ambiguity of the new DfE/DH (2015) Code around the SENCOs' duties, responsibilities and field of influence blurred the difference and created either an inter-relation of the Legal and Psychological Contracts or confusion leading to some SENCOs feeling exploited, over-worked and/or misinformed by the senior leadership within their schools. For example, a SENCO reported:

> 'The real issue for me is time! I need time to: support parents, hold reviews; liaise with staff; liaise with learning support staff; liaise with occupational therapists and physiotherapists; ring parents to ask them to arrange an appointment; arrange special language assessments; speak to the educational psychologists; see the English as a second language staff; help write IEPs and so on. I have had Friday afternoons since September as non-contact time to try and fulfil this role as long as the head-teacher is available to have my class. All this will lead to overload. I feel there is a mistake just waiting to happen. Something waiting to be forgotten. It is difficult to fulfil all my roles within the school well.' (Wolfendale, 1997, p. 22–23)

This was a SENCO speaking twenty-three years ago, but is this story an example of the SENCO being unable to balance her teaching duties and SENCO responsibilities rather than a simplistic analysis of bad management by her school leaders? To automatically assume that all SENCOs are completely effective/efficient with any limitations imposed on them always being created by their senior leadership team/head--teachers would be an incorrect and sweeping assumption to make. However, negative factors experienced by this SENCO in 1997 are still pertinent to today's primary school SENCO.

In the light of this relationship between the SENCO (employee) and the head--teacher/governors (employers) the Psychological Contract expresses the idea that each side has expectations of the other. According to Boddy and Paton (2011) this is 'the set of understandings people have regarding the commitments made between themselves and their organisation' (p. 454) and that both parties modify these expectations as the relationship develops, reflecting the influence of changing organisational (school) contexts or individual circumstances. Rousseau and Schalk (2000) agreed with this definition and referred to Psychological Contracts as 'the belief systems of individual workers and their employers regarding mutual obligations'

(p. 1). However, these Psychological Contracts are fragile and vulnerable; Boddy and Paton (2011)stressed the constant risk factor that a contract which satisfied both parties at one time may cease to do so in the future, thus having consequences in terms of attitudes and behaviours. Guest (2004) researched into the effect of rapid economic change and its effect on employee perceptions of the state of the Psychological Contract when competitive business conditions led an employer to make changes which the employees saw as breaking the Contract. Deery et al. (2006) completed further research in the field and studied employees who perceived their employer had breached their Psychological Contract which led employees to have lower trust in management, to experience less co-operative employment relations, and to have higher rates of absence. Boddy and Paton (2011) make the link with rapid change in the business world where,

> 'previously stable Psychological Contracts are easily broken. Technological changes and increased competition lead senior management to change employment policies and working conditions, or put staff under great pressure to meet demanding performance targets.' (p. 456)

Rapid change in the world of business has been equalled by rapid change in the world of Education particularly related to the political and ideological imposition of the quasi-marketplace where business-orientated methods and ethics and the standards--agenda became inter-related with the 'duty-of-care' traditionally embedded within the philosophy of teaching, as teachers still strived to provide the best learning and socially inclusive environment they could for the pupils in their classes but set within a school culture highly influenced by competition, changing employment policies and working conditions which were no longer stable.

3.6 The Contextual Variety and how this influences the Status and Conditions of Service of the SENCO as a School Leader.

In very simple terms, the Contextual Variety can be defined as the eclectic definition of the SENCO role as understood by school governors and head-teachers and how they realised this role through 'job descriptions' stating key responsibilities around managing the day-to-day provision for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, and their support of the SENCO in their school.

Ekins (2012) believed that the variability in the SENCO role was due to contextual differences and so there was a need to explore these unique contexts. These unique contexts could have been created by not having any common (or generic) working practices apart from that presented in the Legal Contract, and even then the Legal Contract was an interpretation of the national legislation, guidance and OFSTED inspection regime by each individual head-teacher who then worked with their staff

to establish the organisational ethos/climate in which the SENCO had to perform. Ekins (2012) listed contextual differences such as the size and location of the SENCO's school and the number of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities on the SEN list:

> 'A SENCO working in a large inner-city school with high levels of pupils identified as having SEN and/or disabilities may therefore have a quite different role to a SENCO working in a small rural school with low numbers of pupils identified as having SEN and/or disabilities. The positioning and status of the role and overall approach to meeting the needs of pupils with SEN and/or disabilities will also impact on how the role is perceived and developed.' (p. 71)

In addition to the significant differences identified above there has been the on-going debate around the status of the SENCO's role and the management of SEN provision in the school with their responsibility for meeting the needs of individual pupils with SEND. The DfES (2001) Code of Practice suggested that the direct line manager for the SENCO should be the head-teacher as the SENCO was responsible for the day-to-day operation of the SEN policy whilst the head-teacher was responsible for the day-to-day management of the SEN policy. However, a variation was noticed across schools in relation to the status of the SENCO as a senior/strategic leader with additional responsibilities; in connection with this variation, Ekins (2012) stated that,

> 'For many SENCOs, the role has therefore become all encompassing, moving from a Special Educational Needs Coordinator to Inclusion Coordinator, with responsibility for monitoring the progress and provision for a widening number of 'vulnerable groups' within the school context' (p. 71)

Contextual differences are further complicated by this expansion of the SENCO role in some schools and the interplay in how teachers, teaching assistants, other professionals, parents and pupils define how a SENCO should operate and perform. A final complication is how the SENCOs themselves understand and define their own duties and responsibilities and how this changes over time. Although the DfE/DH (2015) Code defined the responsibilities for SENCOs and the National Award for SEN Coordination clearly presented specific learning outcomes for mandatory training, each school and SENCO naturally interpreted and enacted the role in their own way according to school priorities (the 'culture' of the school as created through the performativity-rich-mixture of a high-stakes national assessments programme, published league tables setting school against school, an invasive inspection regime and frequent political/ideological interference). Rosen-Webb (2011) indicated that, 'The SENCO role is unclear in both policy contexts and in the research literature' (p. 159) and Pearson and Ralph (2007) explored this idea of lack of clarity on the role and stating that 'there is a high degree of local interpretation at school level.' (p. 38). This

high degree of interpretation was particularly highlighted in the National Union of Teachers' Survey of SENCOs in April 2012 where many SENCOs pointed to a variety of practice between schools and suggested that the 2001 Code of Practice was being applied inconsistently. This identification of inconsistency was also set against a significant backdrop of decreasing external support to their schools for pupils with SEN through the reduction of Local Authority services and this, in turn, was demonstrated through the SENCOs' pessimistic view of the future.

Perhaps one of the most obvious contrasts across schools is the difference in status the SENCO holds as a strategic leader. The SENCO might be a catalyst for change and development in their school but without being empowered and fully supported by their head-teachers and governing bodies any change cannot be expected or, at best, be limited in scope and impact. All of the previously outlined legislation and guidance mentioned the importance of the SENCO being in a leadership role, however research supported the need for the SENCO to operate in this leadership capacity but highlighted that considerable variation existed in practice (Szwed, 2007; Mackenzie, 2007). The recommendation for leadership to be a requirement of the role was presented by the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee (2006) and although supported in the SEN Co-ordination Award (TDA, 2009) and its revision in the National Award for SEN Co-ordination (National College for Teaching & Leadership, 2014) it was not made concrete in legislation. Tissot (2013) stated that this led to deviation in practice which enhanced the tension between the theoretical status of SENCOs as senior leaders and the day-to-day coordination work which supported the school's SEN policy with the making of decisions which formed part of this. Previous to this, Layton (2005) illustrated some of the difficulties that arose where there was no clear expectation of SENCOs as leaders with some SENCOs believing that key people and agencies did not see them in a leadership role. Cole (2005) warned that the SENCO role was becoming perceived as low status as it was seen as an operational/managerial one rather than a senior and strategic leadership position. This lack of empowerment was earlier highlighted by Cowne (2000) who argued that many SENCOs did not feel empowered to become involved in wider policy and resourcing issues in their schools as they may not have been given access to information or felt that they could ask, as a result any strategic coordination for special needs provision remained in the remit of the head-teacher and governors. This lack of understanding of the SENCO function by head-teachers and governors was previously identified by Wolfendale (1997) after the implementation of the 1994 Code of Practice when she reported the views of a parent at a Council for Disabled Children workshop:

> 'What the Code did was to provide a universal framework which has highlighted the gaps, as well as emphasising the positive. Teachers and SENCOs do need

> time to make the system work. But isn't that where school SEN policies should work? I don't believe that sufficient governors really understand the importance of both non-teaching time and the calibre of person appointed to be the SENCO. I know a school where the main qualification was a licence to drive the school minibus!' (p. 74)

This astute parental view of the lack of understanding by governors about the importance of the SENCO role complemented the findings of Lewis et al. (1997), in a report on a national survey of perceptions of SENCOs carried out on behalf of the National Union of Teachers (NUT); this report emphasised the challenges of implementing the SENCO role effectively. Lewis commented that:

> 'The gulf between perceived expectations of the SENCO role in the light of the Code of Practice and the resources available to fill those expectations is likely to lead to increasing dissatisfaction from teachers, education managers, parents and school governors.' (p. 6)

In this NUT report, a primary cause for concern was the very limited non-contact/non-teaching time for SENCOs, the non-standardised processes and procedures across schools and the overly bureaucratic dimensions of making the Code of Practice work without additional resources or funding. This was twenty-three years ago and related to the first (1994) Code of Practice, unfortunately (three Codes and over two decades later) these issues are still prevalent as some SENCOs are reporting that they are not being paid for their additional co-ordination role with a significant number of SENCOs stating that they have been given little (or no) protected time on their timetables to do the job or have been provided with adequate resources and administrative support. It appears that legislation develops and moves on but SENCO conditions of service remain unequal across schools.

4 Conclusion: School Culture, Control and the SENCO

The long thirty-two year tradition (1988 to the present) of placing schools into competition within the marketplace provides the foundation for the Contextual Variety between schools and how the role of the SENCO is enacted within each one, however the reasons for contextual differences are more complex than this simple model suggests. Mullins (2005) stated that an underlying feature of the 'people-organisation relationship is management control and power' (p. 831) and that control systems exist in all spheres of the operations of the organisation and are a necessary part of the process of management. Tannenbaum (1968) saw control as an inherent characteristic of organisations:

> 'Organization implies control…Organizations require a certain amount of conformity as well as the integration of diverse activities. It is the function of control to bring about conformance to organizational requirements and achievement of the ultimate purposes of the organization.' (p. 3). Berry et al. (1995) took this to mean that management control was a process both for motivating and inspiring people to perform activities that furthered the organization's goals and for detecting and correcting 'unintentional performance errors and intentional irregularities' (p. 18). Supporting this idea, and linking to the connection between control and delegation, Payne and Payne (1994) defined control as 'monitoring the performance of the delegated task so that the expected results are successfully achieved' (p. 161) without the implication that control is a senior management function only as the person delegated the task also identifies and operates control in a day-to-day manner – which is very close to the leadership/management relationship traditionally established between a head-teacher and his/her SENCO.

Mullins (2005) stated that control can stand for reliability, order and stability with staff wanting to know what is expected of them and how well they are performing as 'control is a basis for training needs, the motivation to achieve standards and for the development of individuals' (p. 832) Tulgan (2001) stated ' It is critical to make very clear to individual contributors exactly what performance – what results, within what guidelines, parameters and deadlines – the organization needs, and will therefore reward' (p. 351). However, Wilson (1999) argued that individuals are not passive objects of control as 'They may accept, deny, react, reshape, rethink, acquiesce, rebel, or conform and create themselves within constraints imposed on them' (p. 103). Mullen (2005) argued that most people show ambivalence towards control systems, not wishing to have them applied by others to their own performance they do recognise the usefulness and need for them in terms of the planning and organisation of work functions and by guiding and regulating staff activities. Mullen further stated that a 'Lack of adequate supervision and control, or of an effective risk-management system, are a major feature of poor organisational performance and can even lead to the collapse of a company' (p. 883).

Although the literature relating to 'control' is from the field of management and organisational behaviour it does translate directly to an educational context – for 'organisation' read 'school'. The multi-factors involved in the school goals and objectives linked to SEN are moulded through an organisational structure which uses similar control mechanisms to promote a performativity-rich culture which is further influenced by diverse variables such as school size, location, history, funding levels, staff expertise/knowledge of pupils with SEND, the last OFSTED Report, the level and nature of flexible organisational control and delegation, and the vision and drive of the head-teacher and SENCO endorsed by the governing body and parents. These

individual school variables are firmly underpinned by a national standards culture still related to high stakes assessment and accountability, and the current political ideology of maintaining a very market-led national Education system where private enterprise is allowed to own Academy Trusts and Free Schools managed separately from the Local Authority, in effect being little more than private schools supported and funded by the state. It is within this complex culture that the English mainstream primary school SENCO has to work and thrive whilst maintaining a healthy work-life balance and sense of identity and status.

References

[1] Beeby, K. (2013). SENCOs are people too. *SEN*. May/June 2013. 64.

[2] Berry, A., Broadbent, J. and Otley, D. (eds.) (1995) *Management Control: Theories, Issues and Practices.* London: Macmillan.

[3] Boddy, D., and Paton, S. (2011). *Management: An introduction.* (5thedn). Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

[4] Brill, P. L. (1984). The Need for an Operational Definition of Burnout. *Family and Community Health.* 6 (4): p. 12–24.

[5] Browne, A. (2007). Free our schools from a fatally flawed system. *The Observer.* 18th November. p. 11. [online] Available from: http://observer.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0..2212889.00.html.

[6] Bush, T., and Bell, L. (2006). *The Policy Context: The Principles and Practice of Educational Management*. London: Paul Chapman.

[7] Chittock, M. (2013). 'Feeling a Fraud?' *Edge.* May/June 2013. London: Institute of Leadership and Management.

[8] Cowne, E., Frankl, C., and Gerschel, L. (2015). *The SENCo Handbook: Leading and Managing a Whole School Approach* (6th edn). London: David Fulton.

[9] Curtis, S., and Curtis, B. (1995). *Behaviour at Work.* London: Pitman.

[10] Deery, S., Iverson, R., and Walsh, J. (2006) Towards a better understanding of Psychological Contract breach: A study of customer service employees.' *Journal of Applied Psychology.* Vol 91 (1): p. 166–175.

[11] DfEE (1994). *Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs*. London: Central Office of Information (ref EDUC J022465NJ 5/94).

[12] DfE/DH (2015). *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years.* Ref: DFE-00205-2014 [Online] available at www.gov.uk/government/consultations].

[13] DfES (2001). *The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice*. Annesley: DfES Publications (ref. 581/2001).

[14] Drifte, C. (2005). The Manual for the Early Years SENCO. London: Sage.

[15] Ekins, A. (2012). The Changing Face of Special Educational Needs: Impact and implications for SENCOs and their schools. Abingdon: Routledge.

[16] Fimian, M. J., and Blanton, L. P. (1987). Stress, burnout, and role problems among teacher trainees and first year teachers. *Journal of Occupational Behaviour*. (8): p. 157–165.

[17] Garner, P., Hinchcliffe, V. and Sandor, S. (1995). *What Teachers Do – Developments in Special Education*. London: Paul Chapman.

[18] Glazzard, J. (2014). The standards agenda: reflections of a special educational needs co-ordinator. *Support for Learning*. 29 (1): p. 39–53.

[19] Goddard, R., O'Brien, P. and Goddard, M. (2006). Work environment predictors of beginning teacher burnout. *British Educational Research Journal.* 32 (6): p. 857–874.

[20] Goldstein, L. (2002). *Reclaiming caring in teaching and teacher education.* New York: Peter Lang.

[21] Goodley, D. (1996). Tales of Hidden Lives: a critical examination of life history research with people who have learning difficulties. *Disability & Society,* 11 (3): p. 333–348.

[22] Goodson, I. F. (2003). *Professional knowledge, professional lives: studies in education and change.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

[23] Gove, M. (2013). *'I refuse to surrender to the Marxist teachers hell-bent on destroying our schools: Education Secretary berates 'the new enemies of promise' for opposing his plans.'* [Online]. Available at www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2298146 (accessed 3.06.2014).

[24] Guest, D. (2004). The psychology of the employment relationship: An analysis based on the Psychological Contract. *Applied Psychology*. 53 (4): p. 541–555.

[25] Hamilton, D. (1997). Peddling feel-good fictions in, J. White and M. Barber, (eds.) *Perspectives on school effectiveness and school improvement.* London: Bedford Way Press. p. 125–130.

[26] House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2006). Special Educational Needs. Third Report of Session 2005–06, Volume 1 [HC 478-1]. London: The Stationery Office.

[27] Jeffrey, B. (2002). Performativity and primary teacher relations. *Journal of Educational Policy.* 17 (5): p. 531–536.

[28] Layton, L. (2005). Special educational needs coordinators and leadership: a role too far? *Support for Learning.* 20 (2): p. 53–60.

[29] Le Grand, J., and Bartlett, W. (1993). (eds.) *Quasi-Markets and Social Policy.* London: Macmillan.

[30] Lee, M. (2014) Transformational Leadership: is it time for a recall? *International Journal of management and Applied Research.* 1 (1): p. 17–29.

[31] Lewis, A., Neil, S., and Campbell, J. (1997). SENCOs and the Code: A national survey. Support for Learning. 12 (1): p. 3–9

[32] Lowenstein, L. (1991). Teacher Stress Leading to Burnout – Its Prevention and Cure. *Education Today* 41 (2): p. 12–13.

[33] Lyotard, J. F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* Vol 10. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

[34] MacBride (1983). Burnout: Possible? Problematic? Preventable? *Canada's Mental Health.* 3 (1): p. 2–3 & 8.

[35] MacKenzie, S. (2007). A review of recent developments in the role of the SENCO in the UK. *British Journal of Special Education*. 34 (4): p. 212–218.

[36] Mullins, L (2005). *Management and Organisational Behaviour.* Harlow: Pearson Education.

[37] O'Donohue, W., Martin, A., Nuttaneeya, T. (2015). Understanding individual responses to failure by the organisation to fulfil its obligations: Examining the influence of psychological capital and Psychological Contract type. *Human Resource Management Journal.* 25 (1): p. 131–147.

[38] Payne, J. and Payne, S. (1994). *Letting go without losing control.* London: The Institute of Management/Pitman Publishing.

[39] Pearson, S., & Ralph, S. (2007). The identity of SENCOs: insights through images. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*. 7 (1): p. 36–45.

[40] Riddell, M. (2005). Don't blame the children in the battle for parents' votes. *The Observer.* 1st May. p 18.

[41] Rikowski, G. (2007). Driving Society Forward. Marketisation of the Schools System in England. [online] available at : www.flowofideas.w.uk/?page=articles&sub=marketisationoftheschoolsysteminengland (Accessed 15. 11. 2016).
[42] Robinson, N. (2014). *Michael Gove- Battling 'The Blob'* . [Online] available at : http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-26008962 (accessed 22. 11. 2014).
[43] Rose, R., and Howley, M. (2007). *Special Educational Needs in Inclusive Primary Classrooms.* London: Paul Chapman.
[44] Rosen-Webb, S. M. (2011). Nobody tells you how to be a SENCO. *British Journal of Special Education.* 38 (4): p. 159–168.
[45] Rousseau, D., and Schalk, R. (2000). *Psychological Contracts in Employment: Cross-national perspectives*. London: Sage.
[46] Scott, W. R. (1998). Organizational Effectiveness. In: A. Harris, N. Bennet and M. Preedy, (eds.) *Organizational effectiveness and improvement in education.* (p. 96–108). Buckingham: Open University Press.
[47] Smith, A. (2020). Special educational needs/disabilities and the evolution of the primary school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) in England. Journal of Exceptional People. 2 (17): p. 75–93.
[48] Smith, W. (2016). *The Global Testing Culture: Shaping education policy, perceptions and practice*. Oxford: Symposium Books.
[49] Szwed, C. (2007). Reconsidering the role of the primary special educational needs coordinator: policy, practice and future priorities. *British Journal of Special Education.* 34 (2): p. 96–104.
[50] Tannenbaum, A. S. (1968). *Control in Organizations.* New York: McGraw-Hill.
[51] Thring, A. (1998). The Charm Dissolves Apace. *Education Today*. 48 (2): p. 3–8.
[52] Tissot, C. (2013). The role of SENCOs as leaders. *British Journal of Special Education*. 40 (1): p. 33–40.
[53] West, A. and Pennell, H. (2002). How new is New Labour? The quasi-market and English schools 1997 to 2001. *British Journal of Educational Studies*. 50 (2): p. 206–224.
[54] Wilson, E. (1999). *Organisational Behaviour: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[55] Wolfendale, S. (ed) (1997). *Working With Parents of SEN Children After the Code of Practice.* London: David Fulton.
[56] Woodhead, C. (2002). *Class War: the state of British education*. London: Little Brown.
[57] York, A. (1995). *Managing for Success.* London: Cassell.

(reviewed twice)

Dr Andrew Smith
The University of Northampton
Waterside
University Drive
Northampton
NN1 5PH
United Kingdom