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The Journal of the **Irish Learning Support Association**

Exploring how changes in the Special Education Inclusion Policy in Ireland from 2017 to 2021 have impacted Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in Second Level Schools within one Education and Training Board (ETB)
Colette Ward

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): Creating a Fairer System for All
Dr Trevor O'Brien & Dr Johanna Fitzgerald

Creating Opportunities for Professional Learning in SEN
Dr Celia Walsh

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A Note from the Editor

This issue presents articles relating to the ongoing challenges of SENCOs and SET teachers in schools, while a further article brings a fresh dimension to teacher education and pupil learning.

What Ward has to say in her extremely well-argued paper will be of profound interest to SENCOs and SEN teachers. Her article represents the strongest argument to date for the official recognition of the need for the establishment of SENCOs as leaders of inclusion in all schools. Ward argues that such a role would support accountability, result in enhanced well-being for SENCOs and would also lead to institutionalised and structured support for inclusion for students with special educational needs in all schools.

The O'Brien and Fitzgerald article introduces and argues for the adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in teacher education, which is what teaching can become, because it has the potential to support inclusive and equitable learning, teaching and assessment amongst student populations with diverse learning, cultural and linguistic strengths and needs. It focuses on the three principles of UDL: multiple means of representation, engagement and expression. It also focuses on social justice, the importance of student voice and cultural responsiveness in teaching to accommodate cultural and linguistic differences in school and society in general.

In her paper Celia Walsh bookends the concerns of the SENCO in considering approaches to leadership and management in inclusive and special education. It also focuses on Professional Learning (PL) or, indeed, the lack of opportunities for acquiring formal qualifications in SEN. A proposal is made for the development of in-school communities of practice and school-to-school networks focused on SEN. This initiative could alleviate teacher concerns and support opportunities for cross-fertilisation of ideas and collective initiatives through interaction, collaboration, reflection, sharing common experiences, coaching, and mentoring aimed towards a common purpose.

Pauline M Cogan, PhD
Editor

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List of External Reviewers

Exploring how changes in the Special Education Inclusion Policy in Ireland from 2017 to 2021 have impacted Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in Second Level Schools within one Education and Training Board (ETB)

Colette Ward

Abstract

Major innovation and exponential change towards inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) has occurred in Ireland since the 1960s but more strikingly in the twenty first century and particularly between 2017 and 2021. These changes have impacted the role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO). Whilst research has been carried out on the impact of change on SENCOs up to 2017, no such research has occurredin the face of six new far-reaching innovations up to 2021 (the timing of this research). This inductive and empirical study of a group of post-primary SENCOs in one Education and Training Board (ETB) in Ireland explores how changes in policies affecting students with SEN, introduced between 2017 and 2021, have impacted the professional and personal role of the SENCO. This mixed-methods research acquired data using a questionnaire and narrative interviews with SENCOs. Narrative interviews allowed for individual, personal and emotional stories of SENCOs' experiences and sense of institutional value. Using thematic analysis of data, this research found that the SENCOs in this ETB have been significantly impacted, personally and professionally, by the changes in policy and procedures since 2017. This study offers new data to further support the formalisation of the position of the SENCO and offers data that could be used to influence the establishment of the role at the level of a management post for trained, specialist SENCO personnel who could lead whole-school inclusion in all second level Irish schools.

Over the past seventeen years in Ireland, at Post-Primary level, SENCOs have been at the centre of major innovation and exponential change towards inclusion of students with SEN. The year 2004 saw the publishing of Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) which, though never fully implemented, and is at present under review, changed the education landscape, culminating in the School Inclusion Model (SIM) (DES, 2019) **(See Figure 1)**. The intervening years were marked by continuous innovation led by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in conjunction with the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), the State Examinations Commission

(SEC) and the Central Applications Office (CAO) which processes applications into third level. Circular 0014/2017 (DES, 2017b) outlined the New Model of Allocation of Teaching Resources. This introduced new criteria for the allocation of teaching resources to support students with SEN within a truly inclusive school (DES, 2017b). The new model is structured on the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) programme: The Continuum of Support – Support for 'All', for 'Some' and for 'Few', explained in the supporting *Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools* (DES, 2017b). Revisions also occurred in 2017 to the screening processes for; Reasonable Accommodations at Certificate Examinations (RACE), in Junior and Leaving Certificate state examinations (SEC, 2017), and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) for entry to third level education (CAO, 2018). In September 2019 a new circular, 0052/2019 replaced the 1996 circular on Irish Exemptions (DES, 2019), placing the responsibility for screening in the hands of school principals. This has again been revised in 2022 (DoE, 2022). The piloting of the new SIM, begun in 2019, to be rolled out in September 2020), was delayed due to the pandemic caused by Covid 19 (NCSE, 2018).

Figure 1. SEN Innovation Timeline
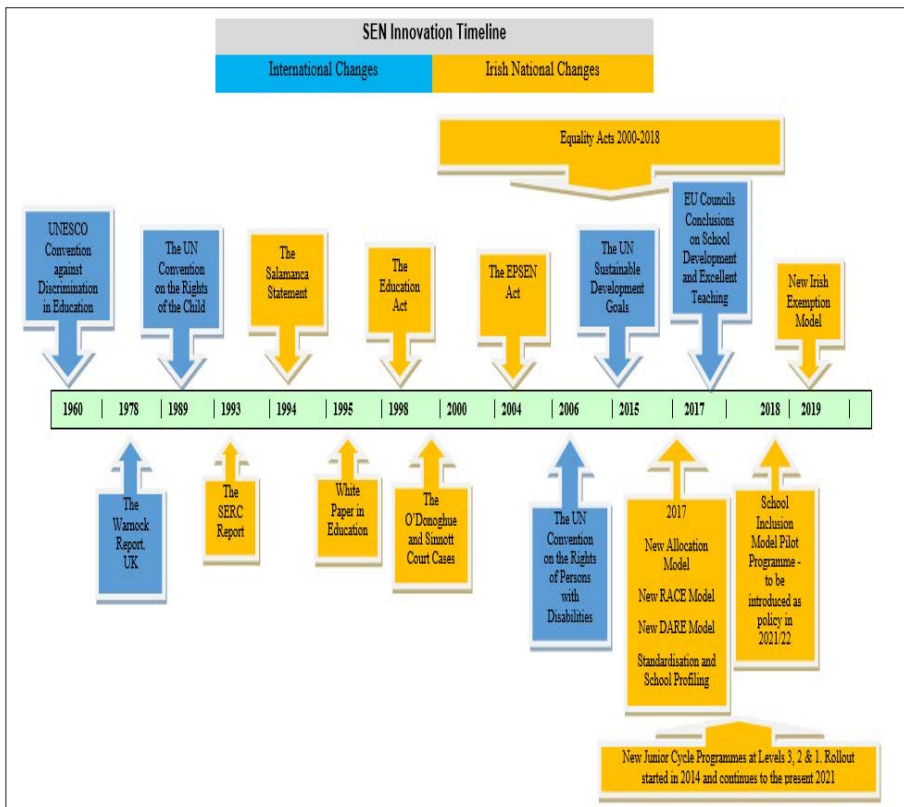
Throughout these changes, the DES, tasks '*the school*' with the job of ensuring inclusion, referring in the main, to the role of the principal and rarely to the SENCO. In fact, the SENCO is mentioned only twice in *The Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools* (2017b) – and only then as a suggestion: "A member of the special education needs team *might* be assigned the responsibility for co-ordinating overall provision for special educational needs within the school" (DES, 2017b, p. 28). The appointment of a SENCO is therefore a reflection of the priority given to inclusion by the principal of each school.

In many of her recent research documents, Fitzgerald has looked at the role of the post-primary SENCO in the Irish education system (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017; Fitzgerald, 2017; Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020; Fitzgerald et al, 2021). Her data points to the need for the formal recognition and definition of the role of SENCO within the management structures of post-primary schools. She avers, throughout her research that SENCOs, as agents of change, should be positioned at the level of school leadership to enhance school improvement. She points out that "while much literature exists internationally, further research is needed that explores the experiences of SENCOs working in post-primary schools in Ireland" (2017, p. 79). Fitzgerald and fellow researchers offer data to support and build the leadership capacity of SENCOs (2021, p. 5). Fitzgerald examines the impact on the role of the SENCO in post-primary schools, and of changes in SEN policy up to 2017 (2017). She points to 2017 as the year that heralded unprecedented changes relating to inclusion for school leaders as outlined above. She states that "Research in this area is timely as the education system enters another stage of transformation with the imminent introduction of a revised model of resource allocation to schools" (Ibid., 79).

The Role of the SENCO in Ireland
In Ireland the role of SENCO is difficult to define. It can be described as the teacher who leads and coordinates the SEN team of teachers and SNAs and who is responsible for ensuring that the school implements all SEN policies towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs (2017). There is no legislation to support the appointment of SENCOs (2015, p. 66). While distributive leadership (2020, p. 10) is central to the Department of Education policy, (DES was renamed DoE (Government of Ireland, 2020)) the policy of inclusion, the appointment of SENCOs and their relationship to management teams is at the discretion of school principals and can be linked to the school's ethos and what Jeffers refers to as 'domestication' (2020, p. 12). Indeed, in the view of the DoE, the role of coordinator of special education is assigned to the school principal, as demonstrated by Kenny and colleagues (2020, p. 14). At the coalface, post-primary principals, according to the National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals, are under such extreme pressure that there is a fear of shortages in the future (NAPD, 2020). Those principals who have 'a clear commitment to inclusive education', are appointing SENCOs as the SEN

policies and provision expand. This is supported in the data produced by Fitzgerald and Radford (2020, p. 11). In this, there is a recognition of the high level of expertise that is required to develop and lead an SEN model that supports learning for all abilities (2020, p. 5). Much research has been carried out on the role of the SENCO and how the position should relate to the management team in second level Irish schools, in the hope that findings would affect change in policy (Rose et al, 2015; Fitzgerald, 2017; Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017; O'Gorman and Drudy, 2018; Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020). To date however, the DoE rarely refers to the role of the SENCO, and only then as a suggestion to principals (DES, 2017b, p. 28).

Research Questions

This research topic explored the occupational and personal impacts of changes in the Special Education Inclusion policy in Ireland since 2017 on SENCOs in Second Level Schools within one Education and Training Board (ETB). The two main research questions involved in this exploration included:

1. How have changes in the Special Education Inclusion policy in Ireland since 2017 impacted the occupational role of the SENCO in Second Level Schools within one Education and Training Board?

2. How have changes in the Special Education Inclusion policy in Ireland since 2017 impacted the role of the SENCO personally, in Second Level Schools within one Education and Training Board?

Other questions associated with these two main questions examined: Perceptions of the SENCO, SENCO preparedness for changes, support of SENCOs and emotional responses of the SENCOs following the introduction of the many changes.

Method

This research focussed on the subjective world of SENCOs' experiences to understand their individual realities and interpret the meanings they are making within the context of change (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 33). An interpretivist paradigm has underpinned this research. The subjectivist epistemology within this paradigm meant that this researcher interacted with the research participants, engaged in dialogue, examined phenomena, recorded data and made meaning of this data through cognitive processing of the data and the use of reflexivity (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 33). This researcher therefore held the position of a powerful resource in the retelling of the participants' stories and the reporting of the findings (Lainson, et al., 2019, p. 96).

A mixed-methods design placed the subjective experiences of the participating SENCOs at the centre of the exploration (Burke & Dempsey, 2022, p. 126). Using a mixed methods design truly enabled this researcher to explore, describe and elucidate the impact of change on the occupational and personal role of the

SENCO.The research was conducted, and the findings were reported in accordance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2011). An online questionnaire and narrative interviews were used for the collection of quantitative and qualitative data.

Participants
Initially it was hoped to have a larger response to the questionnaire. However, out of thirty-one post-primary SENCOs who were invited to complete the questionnaire, only the nine who responded fulfilled the criteria of having worked for four years to have experienced the role prior to 2017 and the changes since 2017. The questionnaire still proved to be very valuable. Of the nine participants, the majority were female (n=8, 89%) with an average of 13.4 years of experience. The details of each SENCO can be found in Table 1.

	SENCO 1	SENCO 2	SENCO 3	SENCO 4	SENCO 5	SENCO 6	SENCO 7	SENCO 8	SENCO 9
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Years as SENCO	16	14	13	16	5	10	19	5	13

Table 1. Participants in the Questionnaire.

Six participants took part in an in-depth interview, all female, with an average of 13.3 years' experience in the role. Table 2 provides further detail about the participants.

SENCO	School Size	DEIS*	Years as SENCO	Post Holder	SIM Pilot	Language of Instruction
SENCO A	1000	No	14	Assistant Principal 1 (AP1)	No	English
SENCO B	300	Yes	13	AP2	Yes	Irish
SENCO C	300	Yes	16	AP2	No	English
SENCO D	900	No	19	n/a	Yes	English
SENCO E	800	No	13	AP1	No	English
SENCO F	500	No	5	AP1	No	English

* Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)

Table 2. Participants in the Narrative Interviews.

Procedure and Analysis
The site selected for this research has been the post-primary schools in one ETB which extends across the suburbs of a large urban area. As part of the selection method, only SENCOs who held the position for four years or more were asked to participate to ensure they had experience of both pre and post 2017 changes.

In support of SENCOs in this ETB, a well-structured support network has been established since circa 2004. The coordinator facilitated the dissemination of the anonymous questionnaire to ensure the voluntary aspect for participants. The responses to the questionnaire, once submitted, were fed back to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Excel formulas were used to identify valuable quantitative statistics, which could be represented as graphs. Six SENCOs from this group agreed also to participate in narrative interviews.

Thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse the narrative interviews. (Cohen et al. 2017; Newby 2010; Riessman 2008; Braun and Clarke 2006). The form of TA which was used in this research is the six-step model, as developed by Braun and Clarke, which 'provides accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data' (2017, 297). Developed in 2006 and involving familiarisation with the data, assigning codes to quotes, generation of themes, continuous reviewing of the process, identification of themes leading to the writing process, until the data can be used to underpin the themes (2006, 87). It is a system of data analysis that is still recognised by present-day data analysts (Lainson, Braun and Clarke 2019). This method identifies, analyses and interprets themes within a qualitative paradigm (Clarke and Braun 2017, 297). Following transcription of the six interviews, colour coding was used to identify themes and key quotes, leading to the synthesis of the data that could be presented thematically to answer the research questions (Burke & Dempsey, 2022, 142). Braun and Clarke's model of TA invited the researcher to be reflexive and aware of their role as the shaper of the research and to see their subjectivity as a resource, especially as the researcher, a SENCO, had insider knowledge (Lainson, Braun and Clarke 2019, 95). To carry this out systematically this researcher also employed the PAUSE model developed by Burke and Dempsey, which further encouraged repeated reflection on perceptions (P-Perceive), deeper reflection (A-Audit), consideration of all points of view (U-Understand), introduction of new ways of thinking based on reflection (S-Substitute) and bringing morality and intellect into the analysis (E-Edify) (2022, 37). This greatly supported the analysis of the data collected from the narrative interviews. The reliability of data was insured throughout by practicing triangulation using policy data, and research data and themes arising from the analysis of the interviews also supported by the responses to the questionnaire. Subjectivity was considered when designing the questionnaire in order to minimise any bias. The researcher was careful to give many response options to questions in order that a specific answer was not encouraged. The researcher made every attempt not to convey any opinions of her own in the wording of the questionnaire or during the interviews. During the designing, conducting and writing phase, the researcher practiced reflexivity: awareness of ways in which existing views, personal to the researcher, may affect how data was perceived (Goldstein 2017, 149). In this way, every effort was made to remain neutral and avoid bias. The data gathered for this research can, therefore, be considered reliable.

Results: Quantitative
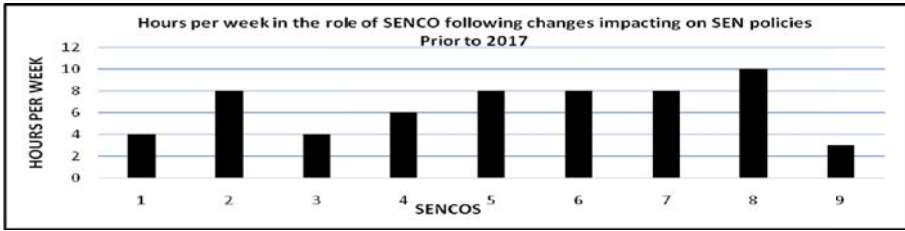
Table 3. Hours per week given to the role as SENCO PRIOR to 2017.
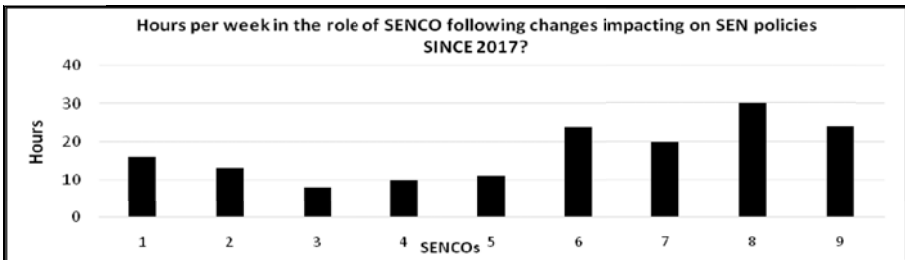
Table 4. Hours Per Week Given to the Role of SENCO Post 2017

The ever-expanding boundaries of the SENCO role is demonstrated in the findings from the questionnaire when the hours spent coordinating SEN before 2017 **(Table 3)** are compared to hours spent currently **(Table 4)**, shown in **Table 5**.
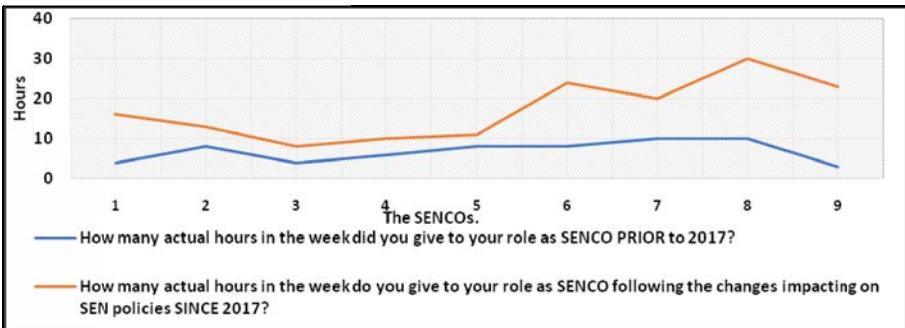
Table 5. Comparable Hours as SENCO Per Week Pre and Post 2017.

Results: Qualitative
See **Figure 2** for the themes which emerged from the gathered data.

The predominant themes which emerged from the review of literature and the data are:

1. Others' perceptions of the SENCOs.
2. SENOs' Self-perception – feelings of contributing to school life.
3. Emotional Reactions of SENCOS.
4. Trust in the New Systems.

Further associated sub-themes like issues of respect, trust, wellbeing, doubt, feelings of isolation, to mention but a few, are also illustrated more clearly in Figure 2. The themes and subthemes were used to structure the presentation of the findings gathered from the SENCOs from both the questionnaires and interviews, thus exploring the professional and personal impact of changes between 2017 and 2021, on post-primary, ETB SENCOs.

Others' Perceptions of SENCOs.
The SENCOs identified many stakeholders who have developed perceptions of the SENCO as a result of changes introduced between 2017 and 2021. These stakeholders include Principals, Teachers – both mainstream Special Education Teachers (SETs) and Special Needs Assistances (SNAs), Parents and agencies outside of school. Many of these perceptions recognise the essentiality of the role, while others have developed unrealistic expectations, and again others confer no status to the role.

The SENCOs demonstrate that their principals were aware of the implications of the changes being introduced from 2017 and sought to appoint SENCOs or enhance the role of those already in place. SENCO 9, in the questionnaire, spoke about her principal holding both jobs until it was realised that there was *'far too much work'* and she was appointed as SENCO. SENCO 8 spoke about a *'different level of knowledge'* possessed by the SENCO and averred that *'Most principals will rely on* [the] *guidance of their SENCO to inform them about students' additional needs'.* The interview participants held strong opinions on how they were viewed by their principals who see that *'the job has become so complicated, and paper driven and there are so many people involved and people management is a huge part of the job'* (SENCO D). Principals realise that the SENCO is *'a leader of teams within the school'* (SENCO A), and have appointed people who are *'the expert in the school'* (SENCO C), who know *'the policies and the circulars'* (SENCO B), who will *'stand up to'* the principal and *'speak out of'* their *'years of experience'* (SENCO A).

The participating SENCOs are also aware of how they are perceived by the staff in their schools. SENCO A speaks of her *'good profile'*, that she is *'established in the school'* and that it is recognised that she is *'coming from the right place'*, *'I am now the person that people look for when a child has a breakdown, any kind of episode or a behaviour issue, I am called to intervene'.* This is echoed by SENCO B who states that her staff see that she is *'well placed, experienced and cares about the students'.* SENCOs made reference to the perceptions of the whole staff,

Figure 2. Findings: Themes and Subthemes of Findings.
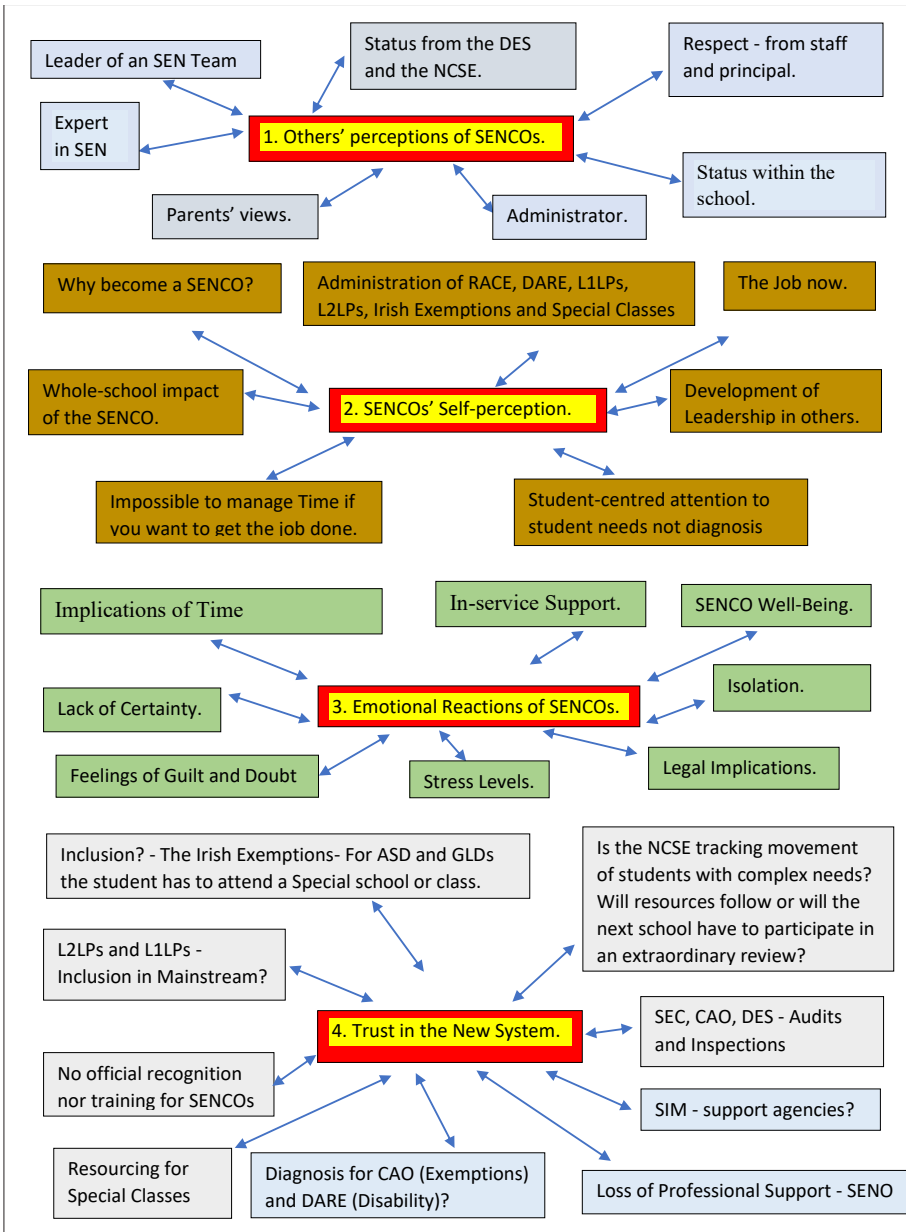
Teaching, SNA and Ancillary, who see the SENCO as expert; *'They constantly come to me for advice'* SENCO C, *'We have a very definite role with Year Heads and management … within the Pastoral Care system of the school'* SENCO D, *'A large number of staff here will say to me, "you are running a school within the school"'*, SENCO F.

Parents see SENCOs in a new light, influenced by the changes introduced since 2017 where the emphasis has changed from a diagnostic to a 'needs-based' system (NCSE 2014, 103). *'Sometimes parents are at a loss and are looking to the SENCO for a diagnosis'* (SENCO B) or *'reassurances as to what their child is entitled to'* (SENCO F). The SENCO is in a position to reassure parents; SENCOs *'maintain a constant communication with parents'* (SENCO D), *'continually discussing their children's needs and appropriate responses'* (SENCO F), *'Parents know that their child is better supported'* (SENCO D). SENCO E explains that the changes since 2017 have placed a new emphasis on the relationship between parents and the SENCO. *'Changes are happening at such a fast speed and so regularly that parents can't be expected to have full awareness, so they rely on a key person who is keeping abreast of the Department circulars and NCSE documents. That is me!'* (SENCO E).

Many SENCOs referred to how they are perceived by agencies outside of the school who are stakeholders in the educational life of the student with SEN. SENCO B points out, with regret and a level of frustration that *'it is a full-time job in England and Northern Ireland'*. She refers to the lack of status, training and supervision offered to SENCOs *'on how to implement anything'* and on how to coordinate when *'we don't have a defined roll'* which is 'ever expanding but we have all of the responsibility'. SENCO C regrets that the role is not recognised by the NCSE and the DoE as a post equivalent to an Assistant Principal's post when considering *'the huge amount of expertise that you have gained over the years and when you compare it the role of a year head….. The workload is not comparable'*. SENCO E refers to the lack of state recognition of the role of SENCO in schools. She points out that all official state or support agencies' communications by mail or email comes directly to the principal who immediately delivers it to this SENCO. *'My principal just looks at the logos and redirects it to me. Now, he is confident in my leadership and that he will be briefed on everything at our meetings'*. SENCO C sounds a warning for the future when she refers to the number of years she has spent learning how to coordinate and gain *'huge expertise'* but without training she *'would not like to be starting off as a newly trained SEN teacher who is supposed to coordinate an SEN Department'*. SENCO E believes that *'if there was not the constancy of a SENCO to lead this, continually changing team then there would be no progress, huge doubt and many errors. The people who would suffer are the kids with special educational needs'*. In fact, SENCO D who has worked in the role for nineteen years and is due to retire, has delayed the decision as, *'I feel that I have done so much work to build up the structures that are in place here'* that *'I can't go until I have trained people to replace me'*.

SENCOs' Self-Perception

The findings from both the questionnaire and the interviews point to three main influences which contributed to the SENCOs' self-perception, all of which are impacted upon by the changes which have been introduced between 2017 and 2021. The first is the variable which attracted them to this role. SENCO F

believes that *'anybody who steps into the role SENCO has the particular needs of the child as their priority'*. *'I love working with my kids'* SENCO B announced when she spoke about job satisfaction. SENCO C spoke about the requirement for *'a huge interest in SEN'*, for *'commitment to students'* and to be in possession of *'the big picture'*. SENCO D stated passionately, *'SENCOs want to know who is having trouble'* and then how *'to support the student and teacher'*. SENCO B summed this up well when she said that *'What drew me to my job is my belief that Maslow must come before Bloom. By that I mean the students must feel safe and supported before they can learn'*.

The second is within the description of how the job of the SENCO has evolved. Each SENCO points to their leadership role for inclusion within school teams: the SET team, the SNA team, the middle-management team of Assistant Principal Grade 1 (AP1) post holders, the management team, the Care Team, the Pastoral Care team, the team of subject teachers, parents and of course students. *'I will stay in and support team members'* and *'I am constantly stopped on the corridor by teachers and SNAs who look for advice or want to share a concern'* (SENCO A).

The third main influence on self-perception is within the contribution of the SENCO to the life of the whole school. The 2017 Inclusion Model supports co-teaching, *'You manage the relationship between co-teachers and if that breaks down it's back to your office to reach a solution'* (SENCO C). SENCO D points out that the establishment of the SET team, promoted by the 2017 inclusion model *'makes the coordination of the department much better than it used to be. I coordinate the work that's done but having the team there really ensures that children are supported properly'*. Also pointing out that having the team supports the SENCO *'with management so that we can request that our timetables are structured in a way that gives us time to focus on the children we're trained for'*. SENCO E sees the presence of the SET team of qualified teachers as a support mechanism to *'help with the decision making and the confidence required in this job'*. All SENCOs also see their role as being distributive leaders both to empower team members, *'develop constancy'* (SENCO E) and *'training people to take my place when I retire'* (SENCO D). SENCO D commented on the *'huge clerical side of the job'* while SENCO C described how *'the numbers are getting bigger, and the administration of the department is huge'*. SENCO B declared that, *'There is no end to the SENCO's work'*. She like the others interviewed, spoke of the huge task involved in coordinating Level 1 Learning Programmes and Level 2 Learning Programmes (L1LPs and L2LPs) of the the Junior Certificate exams for students ranging in ability from severe general learning disabilities to low mild general learning disabilities in inclusive classrooms (NCCA 2020). She concluded on this point saying, *'I often feel like I'm chasing my tail'*. This SENCO works through the medium of Irish but finds that very few of the written directives on changes since 2017 and fewer of the written resources are presented in Irish, thus requiring her to translate huge amounts for students and staff. SENCOs D and F also coordinate special classes in their schools while SENCOs A and E are at varying stages of preparation for initiating special classes in their schools.

The total time currently spent coordinating SEN in the nine schools is 156 hours per week with the average being 17.33 hours. This represents an increase of weekly hours of one hundred and sixty-four percent when compared to the weekly hours of 59, an average of 6.55 before 2017. Stated in another way, this indicated that the workload of a SENCO has increased between 2017 and 2021 by 164% (See Tables 3, 4 and 5). This represents a significant professional impact.

Emotional Reactions of SENCOs

As previously illustrated when looking at the SENCOs' self-perceptions, there is in the findings, evidence of a huge sense of pride, investment and status. The SENCOs agree that the changes introduced between 2017 and 2021are rights based and more equitable. There are other emotions associated with the changes introduced between 2017 and 2021, many of which are negative. All also expressed feelings of isolation in the face of decision making without training, constantly having processes and responsibilities, that had been carried out by outside agencies, *'devolved to the SENCO'* (SENCO C) and battling with management of time in the face of the expectations of the role. SENCO A speaks about never being finished and refers to *'a huge expectation to be producing an awful lot of paperwork that people might not actually be acting on'*. SENCO F, when speaking about the processes given to the SENCOs for DARE, RACE, Irish Exemptions, L1LPs and L2LPs refers to the accompanying *'amount of bureaucracy'*. When speaking about the Exceptional Review Process (NCSE 2021) SENCO F who works in a developing school, which took in six first year classes in August 2020, said *'The amount of data I produced was almost equal to a thesis'*. Yet *'After all of the hours of work on the appeal process, I was turned down!'*. SENCO E speaks about the time challenges associated with communication to stakeholders, *'If one important issue changes for a student, the phone call or meeting has to happen with the parent, the SEN Profile has to be brought up to date, you cannot take it for granted that staff will regularly read this profile so you must get the information to Tutor, Year Head, teachers and SNAs and all the time be conscious of General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)'*. All of this then leads to feelings of stress, lack of certainty and guilt which can be exhibited physically.

Trust in the New Systems

SENCOs agreed on the value of the ideals of the new models. Issues have arisen however, to cause SENCOs to lose some trust in how the new model is being resourced. Furthermore, the SENCOs expressed varying levels of trust relating to the setting up and resourcing of special classes. SENCOs have lost trust in the DoE's journey toward inclusion. They point to the level one and two programmes introduced in the new Junior Cycle and ask if these programmes truly support inclusion. SENCOs agreed their value in Special Classes but questioned how they can be inclusive in mainstream. These are directed toward students diagnosed between severe and low mild general intellectual disabilities. They ask if the introduction of common level papers with no ordinary level

option excludes students from achieving at level three. Issues of trust were expressed by SENCOs related to their experience of the newest innovation introduced by the DoE and the NCSE, the SIM (NCSE, 2018). Acknowledging that Covid 19 has impacted the rolling out of the SIM, the SENCOs distrust the DoE's ability to resource this model and worry about the weight of responsibility placed on SENCOs to prove the need for further resources through the Exceptional Needs Process (NCSE, 2021). Another source of disappointment is the fact that the role of SENCO is never mentioned in any of the communications between the school and the DoE, NCSE or support agencies, yet principals immediately defer to SENCOs.

Finally, the SENCOs expressed distrust in *'joined-up thinking'* (SENCO A) between the many agencies outside of the classroom that impact on the lives of both the SEN students and SENCOs. SENCOs are left to explain to SEN students and parents, that, *'Though the new model since 2017 has moved away from diagnosing disability to a more equitable system it remains that, professional reports are still required at certain points'* (SENCO B). For most who apply to the NCSE for access to laptop devices, or apply to the SEC for certain accommodations in State Exams (RACE) or for anyone applying for an Irish or foreign language exemption to the National Universities of Ireland, or to CAO for DARE (where the D stands for disability), an actual diagnosis is required. *'When is the DES, NCSE, SEC and the CAO going to talk to each other about this?'* (SENCO E). Regarding the Circular which introduced the new model for Irish exemptions (DES, 2019) all SENCOs referred to the extra work foisted on school leaders (SENCOs) without professional advice, as in the pre-2017 situation. This led to feelings of lack of trust in the DoE and abandonment.

Discussion

A visible leader, fully cognisant of their role, enables and encourages engagement with change (Scarlett, 2019, p. 179). Though the sample here was small, this study offers evidence which places the SENCO in a very strong position to lead change and to ensure the correct use of resources in support of students with SEN in a system which has granted high levels of autonomy to principals. The impacts that the changes between 2017 and 2021 have had on SENCOs' workload point to very clear implications for future action for schools, the NCSE and the DoE. Kenny and fellow researchers speak about the new autonomy given to principals following the introduction of the Inclusion Model and the SIM (2020, p. 6). Using the term 'domestication' coined by Jeffers, they speak about how principals' 'adaptation' of new SEN policies can be used 'to align with the pre-existing roles or culture within the school system' (Ibid., 12). They offer evidence of where this autonomy has been misused (Ibid., 14), suggesting that principals' autonomy is predominantly practiced correctly when 'stipulations for accountability influence their decision' (Ibid., 13).

Findings in this study, which add to recommendations from Fitzgerald and fellow researchers, (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017; Fitzgerald, 2017; Fitzgerald

and Radford, 2020; Fitzgerald et al, 2021), demonstrate that the SENCOs, with an increased sense of authority in their schools, who have understanding of policy and have an ability and willingness to make demands on the principal, are the leaders who will advocate and even agitate for the correct and best use of SEN resources. In other research Kenny and friends speak about 'the additional responsibility for allocation decisions' that arise from the new inclusion models while referring to 'existing evidence' which 'highlights the centrality of sufficient, and appropriate, accountability measures to ensure resources and provision best meet student need' (2020, p. 14). The establishment of the position of SENCO would support accountability. Should the DoE establish the qualified SENCO as an ex-quota position at the level of middle management or a special AP1 position, this researcher proposes, based on the findings of this study, that it would result in enhanced wellbeing for SENCOs and institutionalised and structured support for inclusion for students with special needs in all schools. This therefore represents the strongest argument to date for the official recognition of the need for the establishment of SENCOs as leaders of inclusion in all schools.

Other changes between 2017 and 2021 impacting the workload of the SENCO have been demonstrated by the findings of this study. The findings demonstrate recognition of the significant increase of students with special educational needs in Irish post-primary schools (NCSE, 2019b) following the 2017 Inclusion Model (DES, 2017b). Interestingly, the SENCOs do not point to this as the greatest strain on their workload. Data in this research points to the isolation and abandonment experienced by SENCOs who are left without guidance on allocation of resources from the NCSE through the SENO, left with the workload of assessments for RACE, previously the work of NEPS and the SEC, left with the assessments for DARE handed to schools by the CAO, entirely left with assessments for Irish exemptions, once based only on recommendations from psychologists and additionally, newly given the coordination of the DoE levels one and two Junior Cycle programmes for students with severe to mild general learning difficulties, again without the assistance of support therapeutic agencies. A very important finding of this research has shown that the SENCO's workload is perceived as increasing exponentially as a result of these phenomena. Data in this research testifies to an increase in SENCOs' workload by 164% between 2017 and 2021 (Table 5). This uniquely represents significant professional impacts of changes in their role. While all participants expressed an overriding interest and concern for their students and a desire to advocate on their behalf, they demonstrated a negative impact on their wellbeing and their sense of being valued by the institutions who are their leaders and employers, the NCSE and the DoE.

In the findings of this research another strongly expressed impact on SENCOs since 2017 relates to concerns regarding the resourcing of changes by the DoE. Findings point to fear and loss of trust in the national policy makers, evidenced from the poor resourcing of innovations. All participating SENCOs experience

a sense of limbo, where the cohort of students in need is increasing and fluctuating, while access to extra resources through the exceptional appeal route is made to be overly challenging, where the resourcing of special classes is incomplete, and where access to outside support therapeutic agencies is not valued if private, and not universally resourced within the new model of allocation, the SIM.

Concern is also raised regarding the changed role of the SENO, established by the EPSEN Act to work very closely with schools (2004). The SENO had visited schools for yearly reviews up to 2019 and in that capacity also advised and supported the SENCO. Data in this research demonstrates that at present, SENCO communication with the SENO has been reduced to appeals and applications for assistive technology and transport. This also adds to SENCOs' feelings of working in isolation. This relationship should be re-established.

Implications of these findings suggest that the NCSE and DoE must demonstrate their intention to fully resource innovations, both financially and with personnel. This should include time and investment in the training of SENCOs to implement the innovations in their schools. Data from this study illustrates that SENCOs see far-sighted positivity in aspects of the Inclusion Model and the SIM. Terms used to describe both included: 'equitable', 'fair' 'support mechanisms' 'sounds great'. SENCOs' confidence and trust, however, will only be confirmed when these positive elements are resourced and financed. While one recognises that the Covid 19 pandemic has negatively impacted the resourcing of the SIM to date as many support agents left education and joined the Covid response, in truth, the pandemic has highlighted the possible difficulties of the SIM: finance and personnel. The ideals contained in this model are recognised and valued by the respondents, however. It is vital that the ideals of this model are attained through resources and finance and that SENCOs are not left with the fear that it is 'a money saving exercise'.

Recommendations for Further Research and Conclusion
To build on this research, future investigations could include post-primary SENCOs throughout the country from schools of diverse culture and managerial bodies and indeed, schools where no SENCO exists, where the principal alone leads inclusion, could offer contrast. Further research could explore how equitable are the new processes involving the attainment of Irish exemptions, RACE for state exams and access to DARE for third level related to equitable inclusion based on students' needs (NCSE, 2014) or if indeed they play a part in entrenching student disadvantage.

The research question examined in this study arose from a gap in research pointed out by Fitzgerald (2017, p. 220). In creating data to fill this gap in research another gap has been exposed. Further research on the impacts of the new School Inclusion Model (SIM) on the role of the SENCO is

recommended, once the model has been completely rolled out, resourced and financed.

Uniquely, this study has explored the impacts of changes in the Special Education Inclusion policy in Ireland between 2017 and 2021, on SENCOs in Second Level Schools in one ETB. Though this inductive and empirical study was of a small group of post-primary SENCOs in one ETB and not of all post-primary SENCOs in Ireland, it nonetheless has created new knowledge in an area that has not been researched and its findings can be used in further research on the developing role of SENCOs in the Irish education system (Burke & Dempsey, 2022, p. 103). Ireland's journey towards inclusion in the classroom cannot be seen outside of the context of international innovation towards inclusive education where the number of countries who recognise the need for an expert to lead inclusion is increasing. The findings of this research show that SENCOs have been impacted hugely by the changes that have been introduced, affecting students with SEN, between 2017 and 2021. The study demonstrates that SENCOs can be seen as the gatekeepers of the SEN student's needs and inclusion; aware of changes in policy, advocates for inclusion and for students with SEN and guardians of the rights of their students who need support.

In exploring the impact of changes introduced between 2017 and 2021, this study shows that SENCOs have been impacted in key areas; regarding theirs' and others' perceptions of the role of the SENCO, the SENCO workload, confidence in relation to resourcing of good innovation and concerns as to the journey towards inclusion at post-primary level in the Irish education system. Data in this study demonstrates that every new policy introduced between 2017 and 2021 has added to the duties of the leader of SEN in post-primary schools. This study recognises and supports the central role of the SENCO in leading and being accountable for whole-school inclusion in second level Irish schools. This study supports the resourcing of new innovations, communication between all stakeholders to establish one path towards inclusion and above all, the official establishment of the position of the trained qualified SENCO as expert leader of whole-school inclusion in post-primary schools.

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COLETTE WARD

Colette Ward is a post-primary trained teacher with many years experience of teaching students in a mainstream, inclusive setting. Colette, a qualified special education teacher (SET) and SEN Coordinator (SENCO) in a large post-primary Dublin school, has taught as a SET for over twenty years and coordinated SEN for nineteen of those. She is particularly interested in examining the role of the SENCO at second level, impacted by changes introduced in education between 2017 and 2021. Colette carried out research examining the impact of these changes on the role of the SENCO for her thesis, completed as part of a Master of Education Degree at Maynooth University in 2021. This article is based on her research.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): Creating a Fairer System for All

Dr Trevor O'Brien and Dr Johanna Fitzgerald

Abstract

Responding to increasing levels of student diversity in education is a national and international imperative across policy and practice domains. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is promoted as an appropriate framework to support inclusive and equitable learning, teaching and assessment in diverse classrooms. Despite policy commitment to inclusive education in Ireland, UDL emerges as a framework in its infancy across primary and post primary sectors. This paper explores the application of UDL to support children and young people with diverse learning, cultural, and linguistic strengths and needs, and considers its potential to remove barriers to participation and amplify students' voices in their learning. Keywords: Universal Design for Learning; inclusive education; Ireland; student voice; culturally responsive education

Introduction

This paper considers the practice of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and its potential to be responsive to the needs of all students in schools. UDL can be adopted in a range of contexts, from primary schools right up to institutions for higher education and its focus on choice and flexibility is particularly advantageous for students who present with learning, cultural and linguistic differences (Burgstahler, 2020). It is argued that the adoption of a UDL framework is a socially just response when aiming to address the needs of all students in a range of diverse settings. The article begins with a brief overview of UDL, focusing on the three principles, which are multiple means of representation, multiple means of engagement and multiple means of expression. The following section pertains to social justice and how a UDL approach is essential to meaningfully include all children in school in a fair and just society. This is followed with a focus on student voice and the importance of including children's views on issues which impact them, in order to create a fairer system. The final section interrogates the topic of culturally responsive teaching, highlighting the necessity to plan and design lessons in a way which take into account the cultural and linguistic differences in schools and in society at large.

Introduction to UDL

Universal Design for Learning is a term which has garnered much attention in recent years, with its emphasis on flexibility and student access. While the

evidence base relating to its impact on positive student outcomes is limited, increased research activity in this area is contributing positively to both the empirical and policy base in education (Flood and Banks, 2021). The term may be relatively new, but the practice is not new as good teaching has always included a flexible and a multi-sensory approach to learning. Universal Design (UD) was a term originally used in architecture, involving the design of buildings and outdoor spaces, which were accessible to all (Hall, Meyer and Rose, 2012). For example, providing ramps as well as steps outside a building ensures everyone is able to access the building, including those with limited mobility, visual impairments or adults with children in prams. Universal Design for Learning is based on the same concept of fairness and inclusion as Universal Design, and involves proactively planning lessons to provide variable access to learning for all. It has its roots in neuroscience (Hall, Meyer and Rose, 2012; Nelson, 2021), and has three principles at its core, which are multiple means of representation, engagement and expression. These three principles inform the design of a curriculum which is inclusive of all learners (Lapinski, Gravel et al. 2012), including those with special educational needs. The principles emphasise the importance of planning in order to address barriers to learning, by offering choice to students in a way which encourages them to become self-directed and autonomous learners (Ayala, Brace and Stahl, 2012).

The first principle, *multiple means of representation,*is used to support recognition of content by varying the ways information is taught (Hall, Meyer and Rose, 2012), offering all learners flexibility to recognise **what** is being presented to them. As all students have different learning preferences (Burgstahler, 2020; Olsen, 2006), it affords everyone the opportunity to understand information in a way which they can understand (O'Brien, 2020). Students with learning differences, cultural differences or linguistic differences may acquire concepts in very different ways. For some, they may require visual representations while others may process information more readily through aural, oral or kinaesthetic means (Chardin and Novak, 2021). Therefore, providing choice is important.

The second principle, *multiple means of engagement*, supports students to understand **why** they are learning by providing different ways for them to engage with tasks (Hall, Meyer and Rose, 2012; Novak, 2016). This may increase their motivation to learn, particularly if a connective pedagogy is adopted where they have the choice in the way they engage in tasks which they see as relevant and "connected" to their experiences (O'Brien, 2019). All children like to engage in different ways, with some opting to work with peers while others prefer to work alone. In fact, some students may prefer to work alone or with peers in different contexts, so providing multiple means of engagement is crucial (Chardin and Novak, 2021).

The third and final principle, *multiple means of expression*, allows students the choice to express what they have learned in different ways (Hall, Meyer and Rose, 2012). This flexible approach supports **how** students process information

and demonstrate what they know (Nelson, 2021; Westwood, 2018). Some students may prefer to express themselves orally and others in written form, for example, and vice versa (Chardin and Novak, 2021). Ultimately, there is no single or right way for students to demonstrate knowledge and providing choice increases participation and benefits everyone, including those who may not previously have been able to access tasks.

When considering the principles of UDL, upfront planning and design is essential (just like in architecture) when aiming to include all children. Reframing teachers' understanding of difference and diversity plays an important role in planning for diversity in the classroom (Flood and Banks, 2021). By recognising and capitalising on the array of learning preferences in a group as a starting point, strategic planning for inclusion involves providing choice and flexibility at each stage.

UDL, as an inclusive pedagogical framework, has misguidedly been conflated with differentiation as an approach to provide inclusive educational opportunities for students with SEN (Flood and Banks 2021). While a UDL approach may reduce (not omit) the need to differentiate the curriculum, as more students are able to access tasks in a meaningful way (Nelson, 2021), its potential to deliver equitable outcomes for all students should be foregrounded (Edyburn 2020). Adopting a strengths-based approach to learning (Armstrong, 2012) increases the likelihood that all children will be able to succeed. Crucially, UDL is not something extra or something we do for students – it is what teaching becomes when one changes the way we think about the different ways children learn (Novak, 2016).

Significantly, research on teachers' preparedness to implement UDL in their classrooms indicates that teachers' understanding of UDL is limited, which is a concern for teaching in Ireland, when curricular reforms across the educational continuum from early years to further and higher education are increasingly adopting UDL approaches (Flood and Banks 2021). UDL principles, according to Flood and Banks (2021, p.9), which champion 'engagement, participation and relevance, partnership, and choice and flexibility, from primary to senior cycle' are recognisable in The Junior Cycle, The Primary Curriculum Framework and the planned Senior Cycle Reform. Teacher education, both pre- and in-service, is critical to support implementation of UDL practices in schools to support revised curricula across the education sector. Research indicates that when pre-service teachers are explicitly taught how to embed UDL principles in their initial teacher education, it leads to improved inclusive practice in the classroom (Flood and Banks, 2021). Furthermore, when teachers engage in professional learning for UDL and apply learning to the classroom, they are more inclined to continue to embed UDL in their routine practice (Scott et al. 2019).

UDL and Social Justice
It is necessary to consider the rights of children to access an education which is appropriate for them (Council of Europe, 2022). Consensus on what is

considered an appropriate education for children with SEN has never been achieved. In Ireland, as in other jurisdictions, the debate centres around appropriate placement, where political moves towards full inclusion are underway (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2019). Having recently ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2016) segregated special education provision is not recognised as a model of inclusive education by the United Nations (NCSE, 2019).The concepts of fairness, equity and participation in education are at the core of UDL. Traditionally, education was a privilege and only accessed by male, able bodied students with little consideration for those presenting with learning, cultural, linguistic or physical differences (Burgstahler, 2020; McDonald, 2009). However, the move towards a more inclusive system, currently under review in the Irish context, requires educators to acknowledge that all children are indeed different and that "the one size fits all" model is both outdated and unfair (Black and Moore, 2019). To this end, UDL can be understood as a practice which is proactively responsive to the needs of all students, living in a diverse world (Armstrong, 2012). It recognises diversity as the norm, with a respect for difference and unique ways of learning and demonstrating knowledge (Council of Europe, 2022; Novak, 2016). Acknowledging diversity as the norm may require educators to reflect on their own values and assumptions and what they believe students can and cannot do (Fielding, 2004).Teachers' views of inclusion could be challenged and this has the potential to impact teachers' approach to planning for all children. In acknowledging the benefits of UDL, one must be mindful that it is not a panacea and that there is still a place for specialist teaching and differentiated instruction (Florian 2019; Hornby 2015). However, by thinking universally, the focus on individual learner pathology and labelling is diminished (Rose, Shevlin, Winter and O'Raw, 2015), and children may be included wherever possible, and consequently be able to access learning more readily. Providing the best possible learning opportunities and instruction for all children and young people is the goal of education. Special education, nested within a UDL framework, it is argued, is required for some to meet their distinct or unique instructional needs (Kauffman and Badar 2014). Hehir's (2005) definition of special education is helpful in this regard. For him, special education should aim to, "minimise the impact of disability and maximise the opportunities for children with disabilities to participate in general education in their natural communities" (49).

For students with higher support needs, including multiple, severe and profound disabilities, individualised approaches to education may be necessary to maximise learning and skill development, and enable the highest possible levels of inclusion and independence in the community post-school (Hornby, 2015).

It may be helpful for teachers to reflect on issues of difference and fairness when planning for all students (Armstrong and Squires, 2015; Goodley, 2011) and this may assist teachers to acknowledge personal biases, environmental,

curricular and societal barriers, which impact students in classrooms. There is also a moral obligation to respond to difference and to tackle inequality, recognising that education systems often serve those more privileged and "able" (Chardin and Novak, 2021). In this regard, UDL offers a real possibility to be socially and morally responsive to the needs of all students (Burgstahler, 2020) as an appreciation of different modes of learning is at its core.

UDL and Student Voice

As UDL is about providing choice to students, it is equally about providing a voice to students. In doing so, students are empowered in the learning process and learner autonomy is increased (Conner, 2022; Council of Europe, 2022; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Giving children a voice in matters which impact them has gained traction in recent years (Flynn, 2018), and evidence suggests that it increases students' participation and overall well-being (O'Brien, 2019). However, one needs to be mindful of how student voice is understood, particularly in the context of children with special needs, some of whom may have limited language and may not be able to articulate their views orally. This also includes children whose home language is different to the language of schooling. Therefore, voice could be understood as students' views and there are many ways which children can express a view, apart from orally. With this in mind, educators could identify other ways for children to meaningfully engage and give their perspectives on learning tasks, which has the potential to foster a culture of respect in schools (Mitra and Serriere, 2012). This could include using visual supports, drama activities or the use of technology, for example. In terms of multiple means of representation, engagement and expression, children can use their *voice* to identify their optimal mode of learning. This can also be a powerful tool for formative assessment as teachers gain insights into the unique perspectives of students and how they learn best (Chardin and Novak 2021). These insights can be used by teachers to continually reflect on and design approaches which serve the needs and preferences of all students. In doing so, an inclusive learning environment is fostered, where responsive teaching becomes the norm (Glass, Blair and Ganley, 2012). It is best when this reflective process is ongoing and collaborative, including children, teachers and support staff (Glass, Blair and Ganley 2012). Such collaboration not only provides consistency at a whole school level but may also help educators to understand children's unique strengths and differences (Armstrong, 2012), as well as supporting learner autonomy (Council of Europe, 2022).

UDL and Culturally Responsive Teaching

As schools have become increasingly diverse, students from a variety of countries bring with them a unique set of beliefs, customs, languages and values. This provides teachers with the opportunity to draw on this cultural and linguistic capital when planning for UDL in their classes (Chardin and Novak, 2021). Recent recommendations from the Council of Europe also highlight the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic cultures (Council of Europe, 2022). Therefore, when designing and planning for

inclusion, students should be able to connect with the resources and strategies in a way which makes sense to them (Westwood, 2018). The classroom environment is especially important in this regard and could be organised in a way which facilitates learning by reflecting cultural and linguistic differences in schools (Nelson, 2021). For example, a selection of visual supports which reflect the lives of children from a variety of countries could be used to effectively scaffold learning and help all children to make connections between prior knowledge and the task presented to them. Such supports could be displayed in the class for children to return to independently, which would be helpful for all children, especially those who may require extra time to process information. This may also send a message to students that their cultures and experiences are important to their teachers. As well as benefitting the students in question, having a diverse range of resources reflecting cultural and linguistic differences, supports the learning experiences of all children, including those who do not come from a different country.

Also, if technology is used, providing software which mirrors the lives and experiences of all children may be helpful. As it is necessary to provide learning experiences which are culturally and linguistically relevant for all, it is important to identify these experiences from the outset in order to plan effectively for inclusion (Burgstahler, 2020: Chardin and Novak, 2021). It may be the case that some children may not be proficient in speaking English or indeed may have other linguistic challenges. In this case, it may prove worthwhile to give options to students where they can access tasks which require language skills commensurate with their existing knowledge. To provide choice, it may be possible to provide key information in the first language of children, as well as providing electronic translations or links to relevant multi-lingual websites (Chardin and Novak, 2021). Using videos with captions is also a way to support learning where the children can listen to English and read the captions in their native tongues, or vice versa (Burgstahler, 2020). This multi-sensory approach provides choice to students in how they access learning and this is central to UDL (Mitchell and Sutherland, 2020). Another benefit of using technology in the culturally responsive classroom is that it may provide instant feedback as well as auto-correcting facilities which may be done privately and where the student does not feel exposed in front of their peers (Rose, Graveland Domings, 2012). It also has the potential to be individualised, tailored to the student's strengths and interests which, consequently, may increase motivation and on-task behaviour (Black and Moore, 2019).

As relationships between teachers and students are key to successful learning (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007), it is important for teachers to demonstrate an understanding of the challenges experienced by children. This understanding has the potential to reduce anxiety and to increase access to learning (O'Brien, 2020). One key way to increase teachers' understanding of various cultures is to foster collaboration between families and schools. As culturally responsive teaching requires knowledge of the culture, this home-school relationship could

be an effective way of breaking down barriers and promoting open communication (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Families could be involved in decision making processes and may be able to offer suggestions about culturally and linguistically responsive resources. Children's written work in their own languages could be displayed in classrooms and on school corridors. Families may also be in a position to take part in school activities or field trips and this collaboration may increase student success (Chardin and Novak, 2021).

Conclusion

UDL holds much promise as a framework to promote inclusive education for all students. In Ireland, it has received increasing attention at policy and curricular level in the past ten years (Flood and Banks, 2021). Recognising the potential of UDL to promote a socially just and equitable educational experience for all students centralises the importance of teacher education for UDL and inclusive education. UDL, when implemented with fidelity, amplifies the voice of children and young people in their learning, and proactively and systematically removes barriers to learning by providing variability, opportunity and flexibility in how students engage with learning. Recent conceptualisations of inclusive education are increasingly moving away from polarised views of ability and disability, and instead recognise diversity as the norm. UDL, as both a conceptual and practice-based framework, creates opportunities and choice for all students to participate in learning in flexible ways. This flexibility, appealing to learner preferences, has the potential to enable all students to succeed in accessing tasks which may, ultimately, improve students' experiences in schools.

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Creating Opportunities for Professional Learning in SEN

Dr Celia Walsh

Abstract

In the past two decades, the development of education for persons with special educational needs (SEN) reflects the international trend to develop more inclusive educational policies and has led to significant growth in the number of pupils with SEN attending primary mainstream schools. This research considers approaches to leadership and management in inclusive and special education in eight mainstream primary schools. It adds to existing literature by exploring the role of the Special Educational Teacher (SET) with responsibility for the day-to-day provision of special education from the perspectives of the eight SETs and their Principals, while the focus of this paper is Professional Learning, one of the significant themes identified in the study.

The research comprised a case study approach, with a phenomenological methodology. Data were generated through qualitative research, involving focus group interviews, followed by one-to-one semi-structured interviews with SETs and their Principals, while reflective diaries were also maintained by the SETs.

Findings indicate a lack of opportunities to acquire formal qualifications in SEN exists in the region where the study took place. However, a proposal for the development of in-school communities of practice is provided which could create a sustainable model of professional learning. Recent increased individual and collective teacher autonomy regarding SEN provision has proved challenging for schools. The findings indicate a lack of confidence in relation to the additional responsibility of SEN resource allocation. A proposal to establish school-to-school networks focussed on SEN matters is offered which may assist in alleviating teacher concerns and provide support and opportunities for mutual dialogue and collective initiatives.

Introduction

International moves away from the segregation of children with Special Education Needs (SEN) towards more inclusive school practice have brought changes in many education systems, particularly in the role and responsibilities of support teachers. These new responsibilities include the provision of professional guidance to general educators and support staff on the implementation of effective inclusion programmes, and the coordination, at school level, of educational provision for pupils with SEN by undertaking a more proactive role in curriculum development and programme modification

(Agaliotis and Kalyva 2011). These changes are reflected in the introduction of terms like 'special needs coordinator' (Crowther et al 2001) and 'support coordinator' (Pijland Van den Bos 2001).

In Irish primary schools there is no specific, designated post for the coordination of special needs. This results in difficulties for SEN teams in coordinating provision and working collaboratively within the school setting and also with the various educational stakeholders and sectors, with particular challenges in coordination between the areas of health, welfare, and education (Drudy and Kinsella 2009). In some schools, despite the absence of a requirement at policy level to designate a teacher to undertake this role formally, there is strong evidence of Special Education Teachers (SETs) taking on the role of Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo), either in a voluntary capacity or as part of the duties attached to a post of responsibility (Kinsella et al 2014) for which an additional allowance is paid. However, this practice is not formalised and tends to vary in different school contexts (O'Gorman and Drudy 2010). In schools where Boards of Management have designated a teacher as SENCo, there are wide variations in the responsibilities and tasks attached to these positions, since both depend on the particular school context, with no national standards or guidelines against which to measure the effectiveness or efficiency of the role (Travers et al 2010).

This paper reports on aspects of a study which focussed on the contribution to leadership made by SETs whose role includes the overall coordination of SEN provision, and also those who support school principals by informally contributing to the coordination of this essential aspect of school life. The study was carried out at a time of significant transition in special education in Ireland, during 2017, when the revised model of resource allocation, based on the profiled needs of the school rather than a diagnosis of individual disabilities, was about to be implemented. Given that Irish primary schools are not required to have a formal role of SEN coordinator but where many have created such positions through the middle management system (Travers 2017) or through teacher volunteerism, this study explored how school context impacts on these coordinators' ability to carry out their assigned tasks and responsibilities successfully.To this end, eight school settings of wide variation were selected as cases for the study. In addition, as there is no mandatory professional learning (PL) for teachers in the role of SET or SENCo, the impact of this feature was also investigated and provides the principal focus for this paper.

Policy Context
Professional learning for teachers in SEN in Ireland is reliant on initial teacher education, along with limited access to postgraduate courses. The Department of Education (DE) funds the Special Education Initiative which is delivered by seven Third Level institutions in Cork, Limerick, Galway, Sligo and Dublin (Duggan 2016). The main form of provision here is a combined Graduate Diploma course with a focus on SEN, for which attending teachers are block

released for eight weeks with substite cover during the one - year course.Places are limited however with considerable waiting lists always prevalent, while applications are considered only from those who are currently assigned to a recognised SET role in a school, affording no opportunity to those aspiring to become a SET to acquire the necessary skills in advance.

Short non-accredited courses in SEN are indirectly funded by the DES, through the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) School Support service which provides regional seminars on particular areas of SEN to groups of teachers or to individual schools who request specific support and also through the Education Support Centre network which aims to meet the PL needs of local teachers through the provision of specifically focussed short courses in a wide variety of topics related to SEN (Duggan 2016).

The *Guidelines for Primary Schools: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools* (DES, 2017) acknowledge that the quality of teaching is the most critical factor in enhancing pupils' learning and educational experiences. Schools are advised that they 'should regularly review their ongoing professional development needs, with reference to the provision of quality teaching and learning in both the mainstream classroom and special education settings' (DES 2017, p.27). However, rather than focussing on developing individual expertise, the guidance highlights the importance of all staff members engaging in appropriate PL to develop the capacity of schools to meet the educational needs of all pupils, by reviewing their professional development needs and planning suitable training initiatives. Further advice suggests a community of practice approach, advocating that it is beneficial for teachers to become involved in local professional networks (within the school itself and with other schools) where good special educational needs practice and disability awareness can be shared and promoted (DES, 2017).

Literature Review
International research has highlighted the central role of teachers and teaching quality in raising achievement for all students, including those with special educational needs. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) acknowledges that teacher professional development is an essential element of the move towards inclusive education suggesting that raising teacher quality and standards was the policy direction most likely to lead to substantial gains in school performance (OECD, 2005). In Britain, a report by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) in 2006 indicated that the key factor contributing to students' progress (including students with complex needs) was access to experienced and qualified specialist teachers. Teachers are therefore expected to develop knowledge on special education, on appropriate teaching processes, and on working with support personnel (OECD, 2005).

In the Irish context, this view concurs with O'Gorman and Drudy (2010), who

identified an urgent need for specific professional learning for all teachers regarding inclusion. More recently Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) recommended continuous professional learning for SENCos which is specifically tailored to their needs as strategic 'system leaders' and not simply as specialists. While specialist knowledge of disabilities, policy, legislation and inclusive pedagogies related to SEN is essential to the role, their findings suggest the skills and knowledge required to develop collaborative approaches to teaching and learning, ability to develop change competence and to lead professional development initiatives in schools are equally important to facilitate a universal approach to SEN (Fitzgerald and Radford 2017). Other evidence from Irish based research as well as international studies suggests that teachers feel they are not adequately prepared or skilled to support students with special educational needs. (Ware et al 2011; Kinsella et al 2014; Forlin 2010). More recently, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes have introduced mandatory inclusive education modules incorporating differentiation content, along with SEN placement settings for student teachers. These programmes are currently undergoing programme redesign in order to improve alignment to The Teaching Council CÉIM Standards for Initial Teacher Education Guidelines (Teaching Council, 2020). In a recent NCSE commissioned research report documenting the impact of these changes (Hick et al 2018), the 430 student teachers who participated said they feel well prepared for inclusive teaching in terms of developing appropriate values and attitudes. However, they also feel relatively under-prepared in terms of confidence in their knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in school contexts, indicating a need for more focussed attention on these areas in the programme content. The report recommends that components of ITE programmes that are relevant to developing inclusive teaching should not be restricted to modules with titles specifically focused on this area. Modules related to school placement experience and to subject pedagogy in all areas of curriculum provision are also important for inclusive education (Hick et al 2018).

International Developments in Professional Learning in Special Education.
Research carried out among SENCos in Britain provided evidence that just over half had a qualification in SEN (Layton 2005; NUT 2004), with Layton (2005) contending that the failure of almost half of the SENCos to gain a qualification should not be attributed to a lack of commitment but should indicate a need for an appraisal of the support mechanisms which facilitate the undertaking and completion of professional training. The majority of teachers support the view that SENCos should have training in both general and special education (Agaliotis and Kalyva, 2011; Szwed 2007); however, the effectiveness of SENCos who have undertaken a post without being certified support teachers is often restricted by diminished credibility and respect of colleagues (MacKenzie 2007).

Cowne's (2005) study found that thorough training for SENCos was essential, with evaluations demonstrating that SENCos were more secure and competent

as a result of this training, their skills and understanding had improved, and longer-term effects were beginning to be visible in schools. Nonetheless, a need still existed for SENCos and aspiring SENCos 'to have access to an accredited national professional qualification as a matter of right . . . reflecting the importance and complexity of the role' (Cowne 2005). This need was addressed through the introduction in Britain of a requirement that all new SENCos appointed since 2008 must successfully complete the accredited post graduate National Award for SEN coordination within three years of taking up the role (Hallett, 2022; Travers et al 2010). This was a welcome development, since it signals recognition of the need for uniformity in the standard of expertise required to undertake and fulfil the duties of the role successfully. Recent research has found, however, that despite their qualification, SENCos do not perceive themselves as being experts within their role, but they may have been positioned as such in comparison to their mainstream colleagues and parents, due to their additional training and other day to day experiences of working on SEN matters with children, families and professionals (Smith and Broomhead, 2019).

Essential aspects of Professional Learning programmes in Special Education
Research has identified essential areas of SEN for further professional learning including identification of learning difficulties, effective teaching strategies, counselling, professional development of colleagues, and budgeting (Cowne 2005). There are similarities in the requirements for professional development by Irish support teachers as found in O'Gorman and Drury's study (2010), since teachers prioritise Individual Education Plans (IEPs), general up-skilling, information on various disabilities, and diagnosis and assessment, in that order. The emphasis on 'developing individual expertise rather than the need for distributed expertise to enkindle a culture of inclusivity among the whole school community' (O'Gorman and Drudy, 2010, p. 165) is a cause for concern. They emphasise the need for professional learning to highlight aspects such as teamwork and collaboration with colleagues, with parents and other professionals, in order to promote an inclusive system.

Evidence points to the importance of distributed leadership and participative decision-making when developing an inclusive culture (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004), which is crucial for the successful SEN support provision. Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) espouse elements which align well with a culture of collaboration as incorporating good data, good judgement, respectful professional dialogue, thoughtful feedback, and more collective responsibility for each other's results. Professional learning in these areas would improve the confidence and professional competence of those assuming the SENCo role and allow them to participate fully in management discussions and decision-making (Maher and Vickerman, 2018; Szwed 2007). Mechanisms for funding professional development and the provision of cover for dedicated study time should be explored at local and school levels (Cowne 2005).

Crockett (2000, p. 165) has suggested the following five key elements of special education leadership preparation which align well with the elements of a culture of collaboration as identified by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018),:

- moral leadership, involving the ethical analysis of disability-related issues;
- instructional leadership, addressing student-centred learning beyond compliance;
- organisational leadership, supporting effective programme development,
- management and evaluation related to learners with exceptionalities and their teachers;
- collaborative leadership, promoting partnerships for instruction, conflict resolution, and integrated service delivery.

Availability of a wide range of content in training opportunities for inclusion is vital, because if teachers can choose topics and training that suit their needs, the growth of self-confidence is supported (Pijland Frisson 2009). While short-term professional learning courses and seminars help SENCos learn about new developments in SEN, it does not give them the expertise and authority needed to work with and guide their colleagues (Agaliotis and Kalyva 2011; Crowther et al 2001). Indeed, positioning the SENCO as a potential expert without the means to arbitrate the expectations of colleagues and parents to address all difficulties that their children were experiencing with regards to their education, results in SENCos reporting how they experienced intense pressure in terms of 'fixing' issues within classes (Hallett, 2022; Smith and Broomhead, 2019).

Spanish research on teachers' interest in their ongoing professional learning indicates that up to 92 per cent of SEN teachers have attended courses focussed on SEN education (Arnaiz and Castejón, 2001). This concurs with research in the Irish context: Travers et al. (2010) found that the special education coordinators in all six schools surveyed were very confident, with high levels of specialist knowledge and skills. While it is not mandatory, all held postgraduate qualifications in this area and continued to engage in new learning.

Arising from this evidence, Travers et al. (2010, pp. 240–241) make the following proposal, which reflects O'Gorman and Drudy's (2010) concerns about school culture:

> The credibility from teaching expertise can help the coordinator lead and embed changes in the culture of the school. This has implications for professional development initiatives for learning/resource and language support teachers who are likely to take up these positions. Given the critical importance of the role, holders should be obliged to avail of mandatory professional development.

This recommendation has become more relevant since the introduction of the revised model of SEN provision (DES, 2017). The need for formal assessments as part of the application process for additional resources was removed (Walshe, 2017), with resources being allocated to schools based on the profiled needs of each school rather than individual needs (Byrne 2017). Principals and SEN teams are afforded more autonomy to make professional judgements regarding SET deployment, with Rose (2017) suggesting that these are well placed to make judgements on resource allocation that will adequately respond to pupils' needs. However, in research following the implementation of the new approach, Curtin and Egan (2021) found that many teachers still feel inadequately prepared to identify some SEN, expressing interest in receiving PL on how best to identify students' needs in practice, indicating a lack inteachers' confidence which is a cause for concern. Clearly this additional responsibility requires more creative approaches to ensure that resources are distributed effectively when supporting learning needs (Rix, Sheehy, Fletcher-Campbell, Crisp, and Harper 2013).

Co-Teaching Strategies as a Model of Professional Learning

The guidelines for the revised model of SEN provision advocates that the range of additional teaching supports should include team-teaching, also referred to as co-teaching or in-class support. For the teachers engaging in co-teaching models of support, opportunities are provided to model good practice and mentor their more inexperienced and newly qualified colleagues, both SETS and class teachers, through planning, teaching, and reviewing together. This is a finding of Travers et al (2010), who described coordinators as having high levels of specialist knowledge and skills and being willing to lead and mentor staff, support new practices, and lead reflections on initiatives. Meanwhile, Walsh (2012) found that significant value was added to the professional development offered to co-teaching partners through coaching and collaboration in the classrooms. Recent research (Uí Chonduibh, 2017) exploring co-teaching as a pedagogy used by mentors and other experienced teachers, when supporting the induction of newly qualified teachers (NQTs), found that collaborative practices were developed and fostered across school settings when the participants engaged in co-teaching lessons which impacted on participants' professional learning.

Lack of opportunities to engage in PL regarding in-class approaches to SEN provision can be challenging for teachers, affecting their confidence, interest, and attitudes around models of co-teaching (Pancsofar and Petroff 2013). Literature suggests that to support effective co-teaching practices, teachers need PL in additional skills that may not have been provided in traditional teacher preparation programmes, including approaches and methodology of co-teaching (Friend 2007). Teachers who reported more frequent opportunities to learn about co-teaching from in-service PL were more confident in their co-teaching practice and demonstrated higher levels of interest and more positive attitudes regarding co-teaching than did those teachers who reported less

frequent professional learning opportunities on co-teaching (Pancsofar and Petroff, 2013).

Communities of Practice as a Model of Professional Learning

In Ireland also, a large-scale study by O'Gorman and Drudy (2010) which investigated the working lives of teachers who have specific responsibility for students with SEN in mainstream schools, yielded information from 816 schools that recommends a requirement for PL for all teachers in the pursuit of inclusion. It says there is an urgent need for specific PL for the key promoters of inclusion within the school in order to adapt and improve instruction and to keep abreast of policy change. This study also considered the options for the provision of SEN-related courses to teachers. It found that while block release to attend a college or university programme was most popular, teachers and principals also emphasised the benefits of networking, collegial discussions, and practical experience as an effective way to develop teaching skills. This echoes Angelides, Georgiou, and Kyriakou (2008), who advocate the establishment of communities of practice: groups of people who share what they know, learn from each other regarding issues of their work, and provide a social context for this work. Communities of practice are organised around a certain area of knowledge and activity, giving their members a feeling of a common enterprise and identity, such that the manner in which the members do or approach something is common among the members to a significant degree. The members of a community of practice are virtually connected in a collaborative network where they interact, reflect, and have common experiences, aimed towards a common purpose (Angelides et al 2008).

In-school communities of practice have the advantage of bringing teachers with different expertise together in mutually beneficial ways. Teacher groups can be created which allow colleagues to share experiences, knowledge and expertise, to collaborate, reflect, problem-pose, and problem-solve towards a collective goal (Ainscow and Sandill 2010). SETs who have engaged with PL can share their learning by engaging collaboratively with colleagues through coaching, peer observation, mentoring, and collaborative professional inquiry (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018; King, Ní Bhroin, and Prunty 2018).

Since the school and classroom provide rich environments for teachers to enact emerging learning in their own context (Reeves and Forde 2004), 'professional experimentation', comprising changes and adaptations to practice following collaborative engagement with colleagues, raises awareness of learning actions and the consequences of initiating new practices (Clarke and Hollingsworth 2002). Making sense of practical experiences in the classroom, particularly those with positive outcomes, can lead to conceptual change and the acceptance of new theory (Clarke and Hollingsworth 2002).

The development and expansion of collaborative, in-school communities of practice to address the need for PL has the potential to improve professional

practice in SEN provision since informal collaboration or interaction can open up opportunities for teachers to experiment, seek help, and discuss sensitive topics as they feel less pressure to perform, less loss of face as well as less judging from colleagues (Brouwer, Brekelmens, Nieuwenhuis and Simons 2012). Areas of community of practice building that school leaders could focus on include determining group goals, organizing group roles, stimulating a critical reflective attitude, developing mutual trust, promoting ownership and promoting perceived interdependence (Brouwer et al 2012). The development of communities of practice in schools can also benefit from taking diversity considerations into account, therefore school leaders should consider educational level, tenure, occupational experience, and gender in the composition of teacher teams. In addition to organizing diverse teams, school leaders could increase teachers' joint responsibility for tasks and team performance through promoting and encouraging a process of discussion, regular evaluation and shared effort as a way to increase teams' joint enterprise (Brouwer et al 2012).

Collaborative meetings involving cross-school groups of special education teachers, focussing on different themes, roles, or tasks while embracing collaborative problem-solving, benefit the participants through the sharing of expertise, contributing to self-development and facilitating the sharing of resources (Creese, Norwich and Daniels 1998). SEN provision is enhanced; specifically, teachers' confidence can increase, the sharing of resources and expertise is improved, more successful IEPs are designed, and cohesion in schools' SEN policies and practices is created (Creese et al 1998).

A study by Ainscow, Muijs, and West (2006), involving six case studies of school networks, found that school-to-school collaboration is a powerful means of strengthening the capacity of schools to address complex and challenging circumstances. These findings are echoed in Muijs (2008), who found that school-to-school collaboration improved areas such as pupil attainment, teacher motivation, and leadership capacity, when teachers in clusters of schools collaborate on professional learning and development activities (Fraser, Kennedy, Reid, and McKinney 2007). The use of communities of practice can potentially serve to facilitate professional dialogue in an uncritical manner, and in certain conditions they can also act as powerful sites of transformation, where the sum total of individual knowledge and experience is enhanced significantly through collective endeavour (Kennedy 2005). This is very relevant given the identified gaps in access to meaningful professional learning on inclusion and SEN (Crockett 2000; O'Gorman andDrudy 2010; Travers et al 2010; Ware et al 2011), the absence of mandatory professional learning for existing teachers, and the importance of collaborative practice for meeting the needs of students with SEN (Hargreaves 2019; Kugelmass and Ainscow 2004).

Looking forward, the recommendation for professional learning for SENCOs and SETs is reflected to a certain extent in those set out in the document published by the NCSE in Ireland, 'Delivery for Students with Special

Educational Needs: A better and more equitable way', which proposed a new system of provision for children with SEN. The document recommends:

> that any teacher assigned a support role in a school should be trained and equipped to assess and teach all students with special educational needs and to advise and assist other teachers in devising and implementing particular interventions. (NCSE, 2014, p. 77)

While the document acknowledges the necessity for SETs to be adequately prepared, there is no suggestion of the designation, appointment and training of a single coordinator to assume responsibility for leading the provision of additional support for pupils with SEN. Instead, the expectation in the revised model is that schools will 'adopt a whole school approach' to educating children with SEN, with the recommendation that 'continuing professional development should also be specifically designed for principals who will require support in managing the process' (NCSE 2014, p. 52).

The findings presented here highlight the importance of access to quality professional learning for those assigned to the role of SET or SENCo. The provision of mandatory professional learning emerged from the literature review as an important recommendation in ensuring adherence to procedures and successful implementation of effective support programmes and strategies. Also the potential of communities of practice for teachers to provide opportunities for collaboration with colleagues and to facilitate the interpretation of information which can result in the mediation of new knowledge in the community, is highlighted (Fraser et al 2007).

Research Approach

A qualitative approach was employed to investigate the leadership and management provided by SETs in the provision of special education in eight mainstream primary schools. It focussed on contextually based approaches to shared leadership, collaborative practices, and professional learning from the perspective of SETs and their principals.

Theoretical Framework

Collaborative professionalism refers to an evidence-informed approach employed by teachers and other educators to transform teaching and learning together and work with all students to develop fulfilling lives of meaning, purpose and success. It involves deep and sometimes demanding dialogue, candid but constructive feedback and continuous collaborative inquiry where educators actively care for and have solidarity with each other as fellow-professionals (Hargreaves and O Connor 2018).The ten tenets of collaborative professionalism, described by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) in their case studies of school collaboration, are relevant to this study, providing a helpful typology in identifying the collaborative approaches and strategies that enable SETs to undertake their role in leading and managing SEN provision.

These tenets include

- Collective Autonomy: teachers are more independent from top-down bureaucratic authority, but less independent from each other
- Collective Efficiency: the belief that together, teachers can make a difference to the pupils they teach
- Collaborative Enquiry: Teachers routinely explore problems, issues or differences of practice together in order to improve or transform what they are doing.
- Collective Responsibility: People have a mutual obligation to help each other and to serve the pupils they have in common
- Collective Initiative: Fewer initiatives, but more initiative. Communities of strong individuals are committed to helping and learning from each other.
- Mutual Dialogue: Difficult conversations can be had and are actively instigated among educators. There is genuine dialogue about valued differences of opinion about ideas, curriculum materials or the challenging behaviours of pupils.
- Joint work: This exists in team teaching collaborative planning, collaborative action research, and providing structured feedback, undertaking peer reviews and discussing examples of pupils work.
- Common Meaning and Purpose: Collaborative professionalism aspires to, articulates and advances a common purpose that is greater than test scores or even academic achievement. It addresses and engages with goals of education that enable and encourage young people to grow and flourish as whole human beings.
- Collaborating with pupils: Pupils are actively engaged with their teachers in constructing change together.
- Big Picture Thinking for all: In collaborative professionalism, everyone gets the big picture; they see it, live it and create it together.

The data collection, analysis, and findings of this study were therefore considered within the theoretical framework provided by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018).

Sampling Plan
The research employed qualitative methods and a variety of data sources (Baxter and Jack 2008), including focus group interviews, one-to-one interviews, and participant reflexive diaries. Participants included the Principal and one SET from each of eight primary schools, collectively comprising a multiple case study which allows a phenomenon to be explored in its context and aims to generate a broader appreciation of a particular issue, so that the context is different in each of the cases. This was achieved by selecting diverse schools as case study sites of varying sizes, circumstances, and settings (Crowe et al 2011), enabling the researcher to explore differences within and between cases, with a goal of replicating findings across cases (Crowe et al 2011).

Cases	Profile	Gender of Principal	Years of Teaching Experience	Years of Principal Experience	Gender of SET	Years of Teaching Experience	Management Status	SEN Qualification
School 1	232 pupils. Rural, Co-ed	Female	34	17	Female	35	Deputy Principal	Master's Degree
School 2	174 pupils. Rural, Co-ed	Male	41	21	Female	22	None	Diploma in SEN
School 3	411 pupils, DEIS 1, Boys, Urban.	Male	32	5	Female	36	Deputy Principal	None
School 4	222 pupils, DEIS 1, Girls, Urban	Female	33	10	Female	24	None	None
School 5	425 pupils, DEIS 1, Girls, Urban.	Female	28	3	Female	25	Assistant Principal	None
School 6	111 pupils. Boys, Rural	Male	17	6	Female	19	Deputy Principal	None
School 7	76 pupils, Co-ed, Urban	Female	19	20	Female	3	None	None
School 8	25 pupils, Co-ed, Rural	Female	37	3	Female	2	None	None

Table 1. Participating Principal and SET demographic information

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data provided by the interviews and reflexive diaries comprised a six-step flexible approach, namely thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) as this provided a systematic approach to the analysis compatible with the constructionist paradigm. The process included the coding of data into units, described in Cohen et al., (2011) as the translation of question responses and respondent information to specific categories, for the purposes of identifying, analysing, and reporting (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Themes or patterns were identified by using an inductive or 'bottom-up' approach, where the analysis was data-driven and not grouped according to predefined categories (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Patton 1990). The process was assisted by the computer software programme NVivo, a data management tool which assists with the organisation, retrieval, and collation of text into a

framework of categories, reflecting the steps set out by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Findings

When analysing the data through the lens of the theoretical framework of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018), the following findings in relation to professional learning emerged and are discussed in light of the review of research regarding this aspect of SEN already presented.

Participants experience of Professional Learning Opportunities

There is no mandatory requirement for teachers in Irish schools, appointed to a position involving special education, to hold an SEN qualification, although a necessity exists for in-career PL commensurate with their additional responsibilities (O'Gorman and Drudy 2010). Irish legislation and guidelines categorically state that each teacher has responsibility for the education of all the children in their class, including those with SEN; therefore, all teachers require professional learning in SEN, since all classes have diverse learners.

Wide variations in the level of professional qualifications and expertise in SEN existed across the participating schools. Among the SETs, two have formal qualifications in Special Education, with SET1 having achieved a Master's Degree in SEN. while SET2 has completed a Post Graduate Diploma in SEN. SET2 acknowledged the advantages of this formal professional learning in developing big picture thinking (Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018):

> *It gives you a much broader view and also people to contact. It also helps you deal with the system better. You get a lot of what's the current thinking in the area … who are the experts in different areas'* (SET 2)

There are online options for PL in SEN, and short courses are provided by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), NCSE, and the Education Centre network; nonetheless, accredited, face-to-face PL opportunities in SEN are rare in the area where this study took place – a reason proffered by participants for the low number of SETs with professional SEN qualifications, as pointed out by P3.

> *We have spent 2/3 years trying to access some staff training, but under no circumstances will I ask someone to go to Cork, Limerick, etc for training'* (P3)

This study's identification of existing structures and processes to facilitate professional learning related to SEN – including the sharing of experience, knowledge, and expertise in schools – is important, given the identified gaps in access to meaningful professional learning on inclusion and SEN (Crockett 2000, O'Gorman and Drudy 2010, Travers et al 2010, Ware et al 2011) and the absence of mandatory professional learning for existing teachers (Hargreaves

2019, Kugelmass and Ainscow 2004). Evidence emerges of creative PL initiatives (O'Gorman and Drudy 2010) engaged in by SETs to expand their own and their colleagues' knowledge and competence by sharing their experience and expertise, (Hargreaves 2019) and provide ongoing induction and mentoring to colleagues. Mentoring and induction using collaborative approaches such as coaching (Walsh 2012), networking, and collegial discussion (O'Gorman and Drudy 2010) are demonstrated, as well as the sharing professional expertise and experience (Travers et al 2010), as indicated by SET6.

> *I would get any new teachers together and go through the IEPs and how they are laid out, because we have had new staff every year – so they need to know how to organise an IEP (SET6).*

This adds to our knowledge of how SETs support their less-experienced colleagues.

Co-Teaching as a Potential Model of Professional Learning

Findings indicate that collaborative approaches adopted during co-teaching provide an opportunity for the induction and mentoring of more inexperienced colleagues (Uí Chonduibh 2017). Their knowledge and understanding of effective SEN strategies are improved through the collaborative processes involved in the planning, teaching, and review of co-teaching lessons, as outlined by P4:

> *The support staff would be very good with the NQTs and making suggestions and talking to them and helping them out… 'with the support teacher going into the classroom, there's a huge amount of modelling informally and sharing information…. That's one of the advantages of an in-class model'.*

This approach requires strong commitment to co-teaching support models from all teachers concerned, which can be lacking, since schools are still in a transition phase between withdrawal and in-class models of provision (Rose and Shevlin 2019), while a lack of mentoring skills was also identified as challenges. Collective initiative (Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018) by school staffs in the provision of time for collaborative planning, and the organisation of PL in mentoring skills locally by principals, or nationally by established PL providers, would also contribute to enhanced practice. System-wide support and specific policy direction to schools in addressing these challenges regarding to co-teaching strategies is vital in order to improve professional practice.

Communities of Practice as a Model of Professional Learning.

Schools are potential communities of practice for teachers, creating opportunities for collaboration with colleagues, while interpreting information and making meaning can result in the mediation of new knowledge within the community (Fraser et al 2007). Evidence of engagement by the participating SETs in cluster group meetings organised and facilitated by NEPS psychologists

supports the PL of SEN teams, helping to improve outcomes for schools when experiencing specific challenges, as evidenced by P6.

> *'It's nearly like teachers helping themselves in a group. I think it's a good model to put 5 or 6 schools in a cluster group together because if you have a child that's causing a concern to you, you can bring it to a group, explain what you've tried.. it's being facilitated by NEPS,'* (P6)

This example of school-to-school collaboration, while limited, strengthens teachers' capacity to address challenging circumstances (Ainscow et al 2006) and has strong potential to increase teachers' confidence when making judgements about the allocation of additional resources to facilitate learning (Rix et al 2013) and has been found to improve areas such as pupil attainment, teacher motivation, and leadership capacity (Muijs 2008).

Members of communities of practice thus formed can engage in critical dialogue with teachers in partner schools, regarding aspirations and actions, challenging each other's thinking and practices while collaborating to develop strategies for supporting vulnerable students. These local clusters of SETs, if facilitated by the nationwide Education Centre network, and possibly supported by NEPS or NCSE Support Service, if capacity for such engagement exists within their organisations, have the potential to provide a regular forum for collaborative inquiry, mutual dialogue (Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018), and most importantly, professional learning to improve practice. In fact, this approach is suggested as a model of PL in the DoE Guidelines (2017) for the revised model of SEN provision. These models of PL, which foster teacher self-efficacy through critical collaboration (Fraser et al 2007), support teachers in reconstructing their own knowledge and therefore are more likely than transmissive approaches to lead to transformative change (Fraser et al 2007).

Data from this study concurs with Curtin and Egan (2021) in providing important insights into the lack of confidence experienced by principals and SETs in embracing the autonomy afforded to them under the revised model of provision (DES, 2017) when making meaning of SEN policy and practice. While participants welcome this increased autonomy, findings indicate that the additional responsibility requires specific PL opportunities for principals and SEN teams (O'Gorman andDrudy, 2010), as indicated by P6:

> *With the new model, there's going to be more accountability. It's new. People are going to be watching and checking how it's working. For me, I need to ensure that the resource children are still getting their allocated time.'* (P6) v

The building of professional capacity in schools (Byrne 2017) has the potential to boost teacher confidence and ensure that principals and SEN teams are well placed to make judgements on resource allocation that will adequately respond to pupils' needs (Rose 2017).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has identified a need for the development of teacher skills in SEN (O'Gorman and Drudy, 2010), while findings also indicate a lack of opportunities to acquire formal qualifications in SEN particularly in the region where the study took place.

This paper proposes the more widespread availability of courses leading to formal post graduate qualifications in SEN for those appointed to SEN roles, which would significantly impact on SETs confidence and competence.

In addition, a proposal is provided, along with practical guidance for the development of in-school communities of practice which could create a sustainable model of enhanced professional learning, since developing this initiative into a supportive forum facilitating collaborative inquiry by SETs could help schools to improve professional practice by resolving immediate problems (Ainscow et al 2006).

Increased individual and collective teacher autonomy in SEN provision has recently proved challenging for schools. The findings indicate a lack of confidence in relation to the additional responsibility of Principals and SEN teams in allocating additional resources as prescribed in the revised allocation model (DES, 2017). A proposal to establish school-to-school networks focussed on SEN matters, supported by the NEPS, NCSE Support Service and the Education Centre network, may contribute to the alleviation of teacher concerns and provide support and opportunities for mutual dialogue and collective initiatives.

Adopting these recommendations at both policy and school level may facilitate greater success in implementing the revised model of SEN provision and create a more equitable and inclusive education for all pupils.

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