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The 2022 SEND Green Paper and the SENCo: more evidence on demographics, qualifications and leadership status

Graeme J. Dobson 

The 2022 Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Review in England has proposed changes to the way in which SENCos are trained before working in English schools. Although the DfE collects data relating to the demographics of all teachers, the 2022 SEND Review Green Paper does not draw on this to support or inform the changes being proposed. A Freedom of Information request was made to the DfE, from which actual data could be acquired, with breakdowns by age, gender, qualifications and leadership status. The data describe a teacher who is still more likely to be female and approaching the middle of their career. Most SENCos are still on the class teacher pay scale rather than the leadership scale, with a minority holding a Master's-level qualification. The DfE does not have an accurate overview of how many teachers hold the current SENCo qualification. The article provides a number of recommendations to policymakers based on the data provided.

Key words: SEND, SENCo, Green Paper, Freedom of Information

Introduction

This article provides additional robust empirical evidence derived from a Freedom of Information request to critically respond to proposals presented in the recent Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Review Green Paper (DfE, 2022a). The Green Paper was commissioned by the current

Government in recognition that the current education ‘system was failing to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people, [and] that parental and provider confidence was in decline’ (DfE, 2022a). A series of 22 concrete proposals were made which were opened up to consultation. Two of these proposals relate to the role of SENCoS, but only focus on the nature of training they receive, stating that this is part of the problem; however, insufficient evidence is presented to support the claims made. In the meantime, a range of other issues related to empowering or supporting the SENCo appear to have been tactically ignored.

This additional evidence is presented to further inform policymakers regarding the proposals to replace the current National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination (NASENCo) with another a National Professional Qualification (NPQ) and whether this proposal is enough to create a supply of ‘good SENCo[s]’ (DfE, 2022a) or whether policymakers should be considering a wider evidence base. A range of hitherto unpublished data, taken from the Department for Education (DfE) database through the mechanism of a Freedom of Information Act, is therefore presented. The data provide the age profile, roles and qualifications of those who are currently SENCoS. The intention is that any future decisions about the supply of SENCoS, their training and their influence are based on a broad range of data, rather than selected ‘cherry-picked’ or insufficient data. The article concludes with further evidence-based reflections and vignettes that the SEND Review would be advised to consider.

The SENCo and the green paper

The long-awaited SEND Review (DfE, 2022a) was eventually published in 2022, three years after it was first put forward (DfE, 2019b). It proposes yet more iterative changes to a system that has slowly developed since the original Warnock Report (Warnock, 1978).

Despite the importance of this review and the time taken to produce it, its evidence base is scant; it is based on only 103 sources, most of which are existing policy documents or those published by Government bodies such the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) and the DfE. On occasions, where evidence is used, it appears to be ‘cherry-picked’. Among the proposals (DfE, 2022a) there is a suggestion for changes to be made to the training and deployment of the SENCoS in English schools. This section of the Green Paper starts with the quotation:

'I work with all our local mainstream schools. Having a good SENCo is beyond vital, but almost impossible to find.' Head, Special School, Provider Fieldwork, DfE Delivery Unit (2019). (DfE, 2022a, p. 44)

This implies that the issue may be about the supply or quality of those in the role but no other factors.

The review then draws from Boddison et al. (2020) to suggest that the position of the SENCo would be strengthened, and attrition prevented, by the provision of more time and a reduction in workload. Yet none of the firm proposals in the Green Paper are concerned with the supply of SENCos or their workload. In addition, recommendations made to the DfE by Boddison et al. (2020), including 'guidance regarding the leadership and status of the role' and the January census being used 'as a tool through which SENCo data can be collected ... and whether they have completed the National Award for SEN Coordination', seem to have been ignored altogether.

Rather, in the Green Paper, the focus is purely on 'training' to fix all issues pertaining to the SENCo with suggestions:

- To replace the NASENCo with a National Professional Qualification in Leadership.
- To stipulate that all SENCos must have completed the National Professional Qualification prior to being appointed. (DfE, 2022a, pp. 44–45)

What is missing is the rounded picture, suggested by Boddison et al. (2020) and others (for example Dobson, 2019), of the data that might be collected about the current SENCo population, and used to ascertain whether there is a problem of supply, training or status, to ensure that:

- the 'good' SENCo has a good knowledge of SEND to be able to support and advise staff;
- the 'good' SENCo has sufficient influence and time to provide strategic leadership and support.

Understanding these will help in subsequent decisions being made, and/or the structure and content of any proposed NPQ. The above are not the author's

own ideas. Rather, they are paraphrased and condensed versions of the duties advised in both statutory instruments (the Education (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators) (England) Regulations, 2008) and the current Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015), both of which pre-date the review by some time. We now look more closely at these two ideas.

The SENCo has a good knowledge of SEND to be able to support and advise staff

The nature of SENCo training is an important consideration. SENCos are the most likely members of staff in schools and settings to provide support to staff to help children with SEND at the point of need (Dobson et al., 2022). Additionally, they mostly co-ordinate and deliver continuing professional development to staff in schools and settings with regard to understanding and supporting learners with SEND (Dobson et al., 2022). Consequently, their knowledge base and critical understanding of a complex field must be sufficient to perform these key functions. With regard to training to fulfill this important role, the proposed NPQ differs from the current NASENCo in several ways.

The NASENCo

The current NASENCo is a Level 7 postgraduate certificate established within an internationally recognized qualification framework (QAA, 2014). To be compliant with Quality Assurance Association for Higher Education (QAA) criteria, the student is expected to undertake approximately 600 hours of study and to be able to critically interrogate research, policy and data (QAA, 2021). This should support them in writing a series of assignments to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of these areas. These are arguably key skills in the field of SEND in which arguments and concepts are frequently contested or subject to change (see Thomas & Loxley, 2022), and where many of the actual needs to be supported (such as dyslexia or reading difficulties) are based on contested research and insecure ontological and epistemological assumptions (see Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014).

National Professional Qualifications

NPQs are different. Lambert (2018) describes these as competence rather than knowledge-based learning, so more akin to awards granted for work-based learning than to those that provide chartered or qualified status. Meanwhile, Vare et al. (2022) argue that NPQs are designed to deliver specific, and often restricted and ‘approved’ research and content.

Additionally, descriptors of both the time allocated for study and rigors of assessment within the existing specialist NPQs are significantly less than the study time currently expected for a postgraduate certificate such as the NASENCo over the same period. Indeed, the DfE suggests in its marketing materials that over a course duration of 18 months, the applicant should engage in up to two hours study a week, to be assessed by a single 2,500-word case study (DfE, 2022b).

Given these considerations of content, time, assessment and the lack of the development of critical skills, the NPQ would appear to be a significantly lesser qualification. This has the potential to limit the amount and quality of what can be taught, assessed and recognized within an established qualifications framework which confers either chartered or qualified status (Lambert, 2018). This move towards non-accredited status therefore risks SENCo de-professionalization (see Done et al., 2023), an issue not faced by other professionals who provide high levels of advice to support children with SEND, such as educational psychologists and speech and language therapists. Given this, and the NPQ's focus on work-based learning, it would appear to assume that prior to embarking on the proposed NPQ, many SENCos have sufficient knowledge of SEND by holding additional qualifications in this field, yet there are no data provided in the review to understand whether this is the case.

The SENCo has sufficient influence and time to provide strategic leadership and support

Another argument in the Green Paper for introducing the NPQ is that it 'would help improve SENCos' leadership expertise, making them well-placed to sit on a senior leadership team and inform the strategic direction of a setting' (DfE, 2022a). However, schools already have the choice to position their SENCos (or not) wherever they wish within these leadership roles (DfE & DoH, 2015). Here, as Boddison et al. (2020) recommend, the January census can provide an interesting insight into understanding SENCo leadership roles, yet no evidence is provided with the Green Paper to foreshadow this proposal or inform the development of the proposed NPQ in Leadership. This is surprising given that the DfE already holds this information.

On an annual basis, the DfE publishes *Teachers' Pay and Conditions* (DfE, 2020b), containing the pay grades and associated contractual obligations of roles in England. There are two distinct pay scales: 'leadership

group pay’ (DfE, 2020b, part 2) and ‘other teachers’ pay’ (DfE, 2020b, part 3). Understanding where SENCOs are placed on these scales gives some indication of their existing ability to provide ‘strategic direction of a setting’ (DfE, 2022a) and the importance placed on the role by schools in general. It also provides valuable information to policymakers on where to pitch the leadership elements of the proposed NPQ.

The leadership group

According to *Teachers’ Pay and Conditions* (DfE, 2020b), a SENCO paid within the leadership group is charged with a range of duties at whole-school level, including development of vision, values and the strategic direction of the school. Given the description above, SENCOs on this pay grade are contractually involved in the ‘strategic direction of a setting’ (DfE, 2022a) described in the review; however, we have no indication of how many of these there are, other than one source and lots of self-report studies (see Dobson, 2019, for further discussion).

Class teachers

Teachers are defined as responsible for teaching the groups of children which they have been assigned, rather than overall strategic leadership functions. Some teachers hold an additional Teaching and Learning Responsibility Payment (TLR), which:

‘requires the teacher to lead, manage and develop a subject or curriculum area; or to lead and manage pupil development across the curriculum [and have] an impact on the educational progress of pupils other than the teacher’s assigned classes or groups of pupils; and involves leading, developing and enhancing the teaching practice of other staff’.

(DfE, 2020b, pp. 26–27)

These criteria are more departmental or subject-led in nature and are less strategic than what is required for those on leadership scale. Given this description, SENCOs on this scale are contractually defined as ‘middle or departmental leaders’. Given this, the content of an NPQ for this set of teachers would have to be markedly different from that directed towards those with a strategic whole-school role.

The final allowance is the ‘SEN allowance’. This allowance is specially designed for those who work mostly with children with SEND, such as

‘specialist teachers’ who may hold additional qualifications in a specialist field (DfE, 2020b). Those teachers who are neither on the leadership scale nor in receipt of TLR technically have no leadership function in their settings. Given this description, SENCOs on this pay grade are contractually ‘not leaders’. A SENCO NPQ with leadership criteria to fulfill has the potential to be difficult for these two groups of teachers to attain.

There are difficulties with this potentially crude interpretation of contractual arrangements. For example, Curran (2019) argues that often those SENCOs with no leadership contract can assert power as policy actors by drawing on regulations and legislation. Nonetheless, if an NPQ is going to be introduced, at the very least it needs to be pitched at the level of the individuals who may fulfill this role, like other leadership-orientated NPQs which cater for senior leaders and higher, but without additional data this is impossible.

What would further help the review

The Green Paper should be making proposals based on robust evidence. There are several issues that the review should have at least considered prior to making these proposals. I list these below:

- What are the demographic characteristics of the SENCO population – age and retirement causing the lack of ‘good’ SENCOs?
- Are SENCOs so well qualified in SEND that a work-based learning certification, such as an NPQ, will suffice to prepare them for their future duties?
- How many teachers currently hold the NASENCO?
- Do SENCOs hold sufficient seniority within schools to meet the outcomes of a leadership-orientated work-based award?

This article addresses these significant omissions to provide evidence for those who are currently formulating policy, so that their policy can be based on evidence, not conjecture or opinion (see Thomas, 2022, for further discussion) and adds some of the detail suggested by Boddison et al. (2020) that should be informing policymakers.

Methodology

School workforce census

The first stage of the project was an interrogation of publicly available information in the *School Workforce Census* (DfE, 2021) to see whether these

questions could be answered. The DfE provides a range of different overview analyses of the school workforce including mean pay, number of entrants, number of leavers and pupil-to-teacher ratio. The published data can also be filtered to look at a wide range of more individual characteristics of the workforce, such as teacher characteristics and teacher qualifications. The results are then used by the DfE for a variety of purposes, including ‘Teacher demand modelling to estimate changes due to various policies or demographic changes’ (DfE, 2021). As the information required was not available here, a further analysis of the methodology of which data were collected and how was conducted.

The common basic dataset

Relevant codes were identified and recorded from the *Common Basic Dataset* (DfE, 2020a). The *School Workforce Census* guide (DfE, 2019a) stipulates that all schools must identify who is the named SENCo of the school. In order to collect these data consistently and with accuracy, the census uses a set of predetermined codes contained in the *Common Basic Dataset* (DfE, 2020a). The dataset consists of approximately 3,000 individual codes that enable children, staff and institutions to be classified according to a wide range of characteristics. For example, the code ‘DPHT’ identifies a Deputy Headteacher, while ‘SENC’ identifies a SENCo. If both codes are attributed to a single individual, it is possible to identify that they are both a Deputy Headteacher and a SENCo.

The freedom of information act

A right of access to information held by public bodies including the DfE is provided through the Freedom of Information Act (2000). Although data at the level of the individual are restricted, the act does permit the extraction of anonymous datasets that are hitherto unpublished. Utilizing the codes specified codes in the *Common Basic Dataset* (DfE, 2020a), a request was lodged via email in July 2021, using an adapted version of the request issued by Dobson (2019, p. 449):

Based on the data from the ‘School Workforce in England: November 2020’ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/school-workforce-in-england-november-2020>. Please could you provide the following information for the role identifier of SENCos only (code: SENC) for the years 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020.

Request 1: This request is based on the Tables in the ‘School Workforce in England: November 2020’. In a similar fashion please could you provide the

head count and tenure (codes FT/PT) of SENCoS (code: SENC) in state-funded schools in England.

Request 2: This request is based on Tables in ‘School Workforce in England: November 2020’: in a similar fashion please could you provide the full-time equivalent number of SENCoS (code: SENC) in state-funded schools in England by gender and age.

Request 3: Please provide the percentage of SENCoS (code: SENC) for all state-funded schools in England who are also classified as: Headteachers (code: HDTR), Deputy Headteachers (code: DPHT), Assistant Headteachers (code: ASHT), Classroom teachers (code: TCHR).

Request 4: Please provide the number of those within the position of SENCo (code: SENC) who are awarded the following additional payment types in state-funded schools in England: First and second Teaching and Learning Responsibility Payments, aka TLR1 and TLR2 (code: TLE); Teaching and Learning Responsibility 3 Payments (code: TL3); Recruitment and Retention (code: RAR); SEN Allowances (code: SEN).

Request 5: Please provide the percentages of SENCoS (code: SENC) from the school workforce surveys who have a master’s degree, for example MSc, MED, or other level 7 qualifications such as postgraduate certificates and diplomas (code: MAST).

Request 6: Please provide the total number of holders of Qualification code Z201 (The National Award for SEN Coordination) in state-funded schools in England.

Request 7: Please provide the total number of those within the position of SENCo (code: SENC) who hold The National Award for SEN Coordination (code Z201) in state-funded schools in England.

Findings

SENCoS and population demographics

Table 1 presents the headcount of SENCoS in state-funded schools, divided by both gender and full-time/part-time status, over a four-year period. The numbers of men and women within the role remain stable during this time, with women vastly outnumbering men. Over the four-year period there has been a slight increase in SENCoS working part-time. **Table 2** presents the headcount of SENCoS divided by age and gender. Over the

Table 1: Headcount of SENCOs in state-funded schools in England, divided by gender and full-time or part-time status, between 2017 and 2020

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Men				
Total head count	1,971	1,946	1,790	1,853
Full-time head count	1,766	1,700	1,542	1,577
Part-time head count	205	246	248	276
Women				
Total head count	19,479	19,601	19,131	19,504
Full-time head count	12,549	12,410	11,794	11,934
Part-time head count	6,930	7,191	7,337	7,570
Men and women				
Total head count	21,451	21,547	20,922	21,359
Full-time head count	14,316	14,110	13,337	13,513
Part-time head count	7,135	7,437	7,585	7,846

four-year period, as expected, many SENCOs are aged over the age of 30, with an even spread between the ages of 30 and 59. There is a slight ‘bulge’ between the ages of 40 and 49. Nonetheless, there is a relatively even distribution over the four-year period, suggesting that there is not an immediate need to replace SENCOs or that there is a supply problem. Indeed, in 2020, there were 2,903 SENCOs who were over the age of 50. This suggests that the majority of good headteachers should already be in the succession planning stage for the minority of SENCOs who may be leaving the role within the current 10-year period, unless there is another reason why there is churn and attrition among those nominated as SENCOs.

SENCOs and qualifications

Table 3 presents the number of SENCOs who hold additional Level 7 qualifications. Due to the reduced reporting requirements for schools during the pandemic, the 2020 figure has not been provided. Nonetheless, prior to this period, the number of SENCOs with qualifications at this level has been consistently below 10%. Unfortunately, it is impossible to extract from these data whether these qualifications are in SEND or Inclusion, which suggests that the actual

Table 2: Headcount of SENCOs in state-funded schools in England, divided by gender and age, between 2017 and 2020

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Men				
Under 25	4	8	5	5
25–29	77	86	78	74
30–34	279	290	263	255
35–39	384	353	332	342
40–44	372	373	332	344
45–49	346	351	327	352
50–54	299	283	257	257
55–59	151	150	139	161
60 and over	59	52	57	63
All ages	1,971	1,946	1,790	1,853
Women				
Under 25	50	61	48	34
25–29	999	908	882	801
30–34	2,429	2,471	2,336	2,268
35–39	3,360	3,393	3,232	3,290
40–44	3,543	3,620	3,646	3,802
45–49	3,322	3,509	3,598	3,709
50–54	2,994	2,879	2,818	2,921
55–59	1,908	1,902	1,811	1,883
60 and over	872	858	760	796
All ages	19,479	19,601	19,131	19,504
Men and women*				
Under 25	54	69	53	39
25–29	1,076	994	960	875
30–34	2,709	2,761	2,599	2,523
35–39	3,744	3,746	3,565	3,632
40–44	3,915	3,993	3,978	4,148
45–49	3,668	3,860	3,925	4,061
50–54	3,293	3,162	3,075	3,178
55–59	2,059	2,052	1,950	2,044
60 and over	931	910	817	859
All ages	21,451	21,547	20,922	21,359

Note: *Includes those whose gender was unspecified; therefore totals may not equal the sum of the component parts.

number of SENCOs who hold an extra high-level qualification in SEND may be much lower. [Table 4](#) presents the headcount of SENCOs in different positions defined in *Teachers' Pay and Conditions* (DfE, 2020b) who hold the NASENCO. Although the 2020 data were again absent, the figures are alarming, as they

Table 3: Percentages of SENCOs in state-funded schools in England who held a Level 7 qualification between 2017 and 2020

	2017	2018	2019	2020*
Master's degree, for example MSc, MEd, or other Level 7 qualifications such as postgraduate certificates and diplomas	6.4	8.1	7.6	n.a.

Note: *To reduce burden on schools and local authorities during the pandemic, data on qualifications were not collected in 2020. Data collection resumed in 2021.

Table 4: Headcount of those in school positions who held Qualification Code Z201 (NASENCO) in state-funded schools in England between 2017 and 2020

	2017	2018	2019	2020*
Executive headteacher	0	8	8	n.a.
Headteacher	72	128	135	n.a.
Deputy head	115	185	185	n.a.
Assistant head	130	208	208	n.a.
Classroom teacher	164	355	301	n.a.
Classroom teacher, main pay range	99	138	114	n.a.
Classroom teacher, upper pay range	346	516	483	n.a.
Leading practitioner	13	24	21	n.a.
Advisory teacher	4	6	9	n.a.

Note: *To reduce burden on schools and local authorities during the pandemic, data on qualifications were not collected in 2020. Data collection resumed in 2021.

appear to significantly underestimate the number of teachers who hold this award, with only 1,464 holders across all settings in England in 2019. This was questioned with the DfE, which suggested that if schools did not attribute the code Z201 to a teacher, then these data would not be included. This is disappointing, as it seems that there are no data to help understand the spread of the NASENCO and that this has not been followed up by the relevant authorities.

SENCOs and leadership status

Table 5 presents the percentages of SENCOs according to their position in *Teachers' Pay and Conditions*. In 2020, 36.3% of SENCOs were being paid

Table 5: Percentages of SENCOs according to their role defined in Teachers' Pay and Conditions between 2017 and 2020

Role of SENCO	2017	2018	2019	2020
Headteachers	10.4	10.2	9.3	9.5
Deputy headteachers	11.8	11.6	11.1	10.9
Assistant headteachers	15.1	15.3	15.8	15.9
First and second Teaching and Learning Responsibility Payments, aka TLR1 and TLR2	24.4	23.4	23.1	21.9
Teaching and Learning Responsibility 3	1.3	1.4	1.2	1.2
Recruitment and retention	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1
SEN allowances	14.5	14.5	14.6	15.1
Class teachers	22.3	23.5	24.6	25.5

on the Leadership scale of *Teachers' Pay and Conditions*, a slight decrease from 37.3% in 2017. As such, according to the role descriptors and regulations outlined in *Teachers' Pay and Conditions* (DfE, 2020b), just over a third of SENCOs are currently 'senior or strategic' leaders within school settings. Again, the number of teachers in the role holding TLRs is relatively consistent over a four-year period, with 23.1% of SENCOs in 2020 taking on a role which fits the remit of the TLR award and does not involve whole-school strategic leadership. As such, according to the role descriptions outlined in *Teachers' Pay and Conditions* (DfE, 2020b), approximately a quarter of SENCOs are 'middle or departmental leaders'. Many SENCOs do not receive any extra payment and are being paid on the class teacher scale (25.5% in 2020), and are 'not leaders' or regarded as a 'specialist teacher' (15.1%), rather than a middle or senior leader, by being awarded a SEN allowance. This would suggest that according to the role descriptions outlined in *Teachers' Pay and Conditions* (DfE, 2020b), just over 40% of SENCOs do not technically have any leadership responsibilities. Indeed, the number of SENCOs without any middle or senior leadership authority has increased by just under 4% over a four-year period.

Recommendations

Given the data provided here, it is possible to make further evidence-based recommendations to those formulating policy.

There needs to be an understanding of SENCo attrition

Given that the population of SENCos illustrates that there is no immediate threat of large numbers of SENCos retiring, there needs to be some consideration of why people leave the role. Admittedly, some do this because they use it as an avenue for promotion (Dobson & Douglas, 2020a, 2020b). This is to be encouraged, as senior leaders who have experience of the role have the potential to strengthen support for children with SEND across the school system. However, the review needs to consider tracking teachers who have undertaken this role, in order to understand SENCo destinations. Is it that experience within the complex role of the SENCo provides the necessary skills and attributes to move into senior and wider positions elsewhere (Dobson & Douglas, 2020b), or is it that attrition can be explained by the sheer complexity of what is expected from them (Boddison et al., 2020; Curran & Boddison, 2021)?

SENCo training needs to develop a deep knowledge of SEND and practical leadership competences

The evidence suggests that the majority of SENCos have not had further accredited formal training in the field of SEND since their degrees. Indeed, given the fact that the dataset explored here does not differentiate the subjects of these degrees, then it is anticipated that there are even fewer SENCos with this knowledge. The proposal to restrict this further through an NPQ is a worrying development, unless of course there is a dual route to become a 'SENCo leader'. For example, prospective SENCos may undertake a recognized higher education qualification in SEND. This could be followed by undertaking an NPQ in senior leadership. This would certainly enable a dual channel of SENCos who are able to:

1. develop a critical understanding of their knowledge of the complex field of SEND;
2. construct a case study of their leadership experiences of applying this knowledge as the NPQ would enable them to do so.

Given what is involved in the NPQ, it is difficult to envisage that this alone is sufficient to support the development of future SENCos.

The current holders of the NASENCo should be formally recorded

The limited number of people in schools who currently hold the NASENCo appears to be inaccurate. This is surprising, given that since 2009 the award has been embedded in law – yet is not tracked by the Teacher Regulation Agency,

Ofsted or the DfE. This is tantamount to negligence, especially as it is possible to download qualifications and proof of most other awards from the website of the Teacher Regulation Agency (2022). Notwithstanding, if the number of providers (which now exceeds 40; Leading Learning for SEND Community Interest Company, 2022) have been training SENCOs through the NASENCo since 2009, it is worth knowing what the destinations of their alumni are. This is especially the case given that many schools are using public money to fund these training places. Rather than propose yet another qualification, there needs to be an investigation into the supply of teachers who have already gained this award. Potential questions could include:

- Have they been promoted out of the position after the award?

This could indicate that the impact of the NASENCo is much deeper and positively impactful than otherwise imagined.

- Have they completed the award for other reasons such as professional development?
- Have they left the role of SENCO after completing the award?

The problem is we cannot ask these questions, because the DfE does not know who to ask. Conducting major reviews and making policy changes without understanding the current landscape is irresponsible at best.

The leadership status of SENCOs needs to be specified

All schools are different, and it is appreciated that there needs to be some flexibility because of this. However, in this article it is argued that understanding where SENCOs are placed in *Teachers' Pay and Conditions* tells us a lot about how schools envisage the role and how a proposed NPQ may be pitched. Here are four vignettes based on conversations with real SENCOs to illustrate this point:

School 1: The SENCO is an Assistant Headteacher. As such they are a 'senior or strategic leader' and would have few difficulties meeting the requirements of a leadership-orientated NPQ. They use their strategic influence and authority across the school to develop a strategic response to supporting all children rather than just those with SEND.

School 2: The SENCO holds a TLR. As such they are a 'middle or departmental leader'. They lead a SEND department in a secondary school and

deploy teaching assistants to deliver a range of interventions. They are seen as effective in this role, but in the recent Ofsted inspection, the school is advised to develop more inclusive teaching approaches across all curriculum areas.

School 3: The SENCo holds a SEN award. As such they are a ‘specialist teacher’. They work with individual children. In a recent Ofsted inspection, the teacher is praised for this work, but SEND requires improvement across the whole school due to a lack of strategic direction in the development of whole-school teaching approaches. Their lack of official leadership status risks them being unable to meet the requirements of a leadership-orientated NPQ.

School 4: The SENCo is a class teacher and as such is ‘not a leader’. In their teaching, they have been regarded as outstanding but now have no time to fulfil the roles of teacher and SENCo effectively as they teach full-time. Parents are complaining because they say that the SENCo is inaccessible. The SENCo has no influence or voice (or understanding of what occurs) within the middle and senior leadership teams, which limits their ability to complete a leadership-focused NPQ.

The above are crude examples, but the data provided in this article do provide at least an understanding of those to whom these vignettes may apply. The cases provided are real given the author’s experiences of teaching SENCos on the NASENCo. However, what is important is that the individual on the leadership scale may be regarded as a ‘good SENCo’ (DfE, 2022a) while the SENCo in School 4 may be considered ineffective. Yet this judgment is unfair given the situational differences between the two, imposed by the way the role is defined in schools. Nevertheless, leadership status is not even considered or addressed in the review.

Conclusion

Thomas (2022) rightly highlights the importance of using evidence when making key policy decisions. Indeed, as the word ‘evidence’ is mentioned 32 times in the review (DfE, 2022a), its importance is also acknowledged there. The evidence held by the DfE but not presented in the Green Paper should be included in discussions with regard to the future of SENCo training, deployment and role. This article has presented a range of data from a Freedom of Information Request. The data are provided to ensure that policy following on from the Green Paper is not ‘inappropriately ... formulated for convenience, cost or political dogma’ (Thomas, 2022). This would be unfortunate for the many SENCos who work with, support and advocate for those with SEND in England.

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