

Special Educational Needs Coordinators in England: Changemakers in Mainstream School Settings

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Abstract : This paper reports doctoral research into the impact of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) on teachers in England, UK. Since 1994, it has been compulsory for all mainstream schools in the UK to have a SENCO who coordinates assessment and provision for supporting pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN), helping teachers to develop and implement optimal SEN planning and resources. SENCOs' roles have evolved as various policies continually redefined SEN provision, impacting their positioning within the school hierarchical structure. SENCOs in England are increasingly recognised as key members of school senior management teams. In this paper, It will be argued that despite issues around the transformative 'professionalisation' of their role, and subsequent conflict around boundaries and power relations, SENCOs enhance teachers' abilities in terms of delivering optimal SEN provision. There is a significant international dimension to the issue: a similar role in respect of SEN management already exists in countries such as Ireland, Finland and Singapore, whilst in other countries, such as Italy and India, the introduction of a role similar to that of a SENCO is currently under discussion. The research question addressed is: do SENCOs enhance teachers' abilities to be effective teachers of children with Special Educational Needs? The theoretical framework of the project is that of interpretivism, as it is acknowledged that there are contexts and realities are social constructions. The study applied a mixed method approach consisting of two phases. The first phase involved a purposive survey (n=42) of 223 primary school SENCOs, which enabled a deeper insight into SENCOs' perceptions of their roles in relation to teachers. The second phase consisted of semi-structured interviews (n=36) of SENCOs, teachers and head teachers, in addition to school SEN-related documentation scrutiny. 'Trustworthiness' was accomplished through data and methodological triangulation, in addition to a rigorous process of coding and thematic analysis. The research was informed by an Ethical Code as per national guidelines. Research findings point to the evolutionary aspect of the SENCO role having engendered a culture of expectations amongst practitioners, as SENCOs transition from being 'fixers' to being 'enablers' of teachers. Outcomes indicate that SENCOs can empower teaching staff through the dissemination of specialist knowledge. However, there must be resources clearly identified for such dissemination to take place. It is imperative that both SENCOs and teachers alike address the issue of absolution of responsibility that arises when the ownership and accountability for the planning and implementation of SEN provision are not clarified so as to ensure the promotion of a positive school ethos around inclusive practices. Optimal outcomes through effective SEN interventions and teaching practices are positively correlated with the inclusion of teachers in the planning and execution of SEN provisions. An international audience can consider how the key findings are being manifest in a global context, with reference to their own educational settings. Research outcomes can aid the development of specific competencies needed to shape optimal inclusive educational settings in accordance with the official global priorities pertaining to inclusion.

Keywords : inclusion, school professionals, school leadership, special educational needs (SEN), special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs)

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