

**“An exploration of how newly qualified  
SENCOs understand their professional  
identity and implications for the ongoing  
development of the professional role”**

**by**

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## Abstract

This study focuses on understanding the lived experiences of seven newly qualified SENCOs from primary and secondary schools across the south-east of England as they experienced and explored the development of their new professional identity. The concept of professional identity is multi-faceted (Ibarra, 1999; Beijaard et al, 2004), and this phenomenological study highlights the interplay between the participants personal and social identities with educational policies and wider world views.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al, 2009) was used to explore participants' understanding during two semi-structured interviews approximately 10 months apart. Hermeneutic circles of interpretation were used to gain rich insight into how individuals understood their professional identity before considering common and disparate themes expressed across this idiographic group. Four superordinate themes: the impact of relationships, shared responsibility, personal attributes and knowledge, emerged from the analysis.

During this study, factors that aided the development of newly qualified SENCOs' professional identity were highlighted, alongside those that created barriers. The unique insight provided through direct engagement with newly qualified SENCOs illustrated the importance of developing the knowledge of all teachers and educational leaders regarding the role of the SENCO and highlighted how clarity around the role, careful recruitment and induction, and ongoing Continual Professional Development (CPD) can aid the development of professional identity and so increase the confidence of those in role.

These findings are compatible with several studies on the development of professional identity but also contribute an original idiographic perspective on the development of professional identity for newly qualified SENCOs. This has implications for professional development and career pathways for individual staff and for recruitment and retention considerations for school leaders, local authorities, and policy makers.

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**List of abbreviations**

CoP (SEN) Code of Practice

EHCP Education, Health and Care Plan

LA Local Authority

IPA Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

NASC National Award for Special Needs Coordination (also referred to as NASENC; NASENCo)

SEN Special Educational Needs

SENCo Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (also referred to as SENCO; SENDCo)

SEND Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SLT Senior Leadership Team

TA Teaching Assistant (also referred to as Learning Support Assistant, LSA)

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Chapter overview

This chapter outlines the rationale for this research, its aims and purpose and the establishment of a conceptual framework from which the study developed. The chapter also explains my position in relation to the research and the context of the study.

### 1.2 Rationale for the research

This research focused on newly qualified Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators' (SENCo's) experiences of the development of their own professional identity. Seven newly qualified SENCos who were working in primary or secondary schools in the south-east of England participated in two individual, semi-structured interviews which were then analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This rich, qualitative data was explored to enhance understanding of how newly qualified SENCos experience the development of their professional identity, to consider what this constitutes and possible factors that strengthen or challenge it.

Data from *'School, pupils and their characteristics: January 2021'* (DfE 2021a) showed that there were 24,413 state-funded and independent schools in England who are required to have regard for the *'Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years'* (DfE/DoH 2015). This includes a statutory duty to ensure that there is a qualified teacher designated as SENCo for the school (DfE/ DoH 2015). *'Special Educational Need in England – January 2021'* (DfE 2021b) showed that 15.4% (1,408,701) pupils had special educational needs (SEN). This evidences that this research could impact a significant number of pupils and members of the education workforce in England. Furthermore, at the time of the research there were 32 providers for the National Award for SEN Co-ordination (NASC) some of whom may have multiple cohorts each year, suggesting an increasing demand for places due to retention issues and the need for further research to better understand this.

I believe that the demand for places on the NASC course highlights the turnover of SENCos in our schools, although there is currently no published national data to demonstrate this (Dobson, 2019). Given that children with SEN are sometimes referred to as 'vulnerable' it is vital that schools can employ well-qualified and experienced staff to recognise and meet the needs of these pupils. Furthermore, I believe that education staff who undertake Master's level study alongside their work

have shown a commitment to the role and therefore further consideration is needed regarding reasons why SENCo's are continuing to leave this position.

I feel that there is a moral imperative for us to understand the development of the SENCo's professional identity to support those who are new to the role and, in doing so, support our children and young people with SEN.

### **1.3 Research aims and purpose**

The primary aim of this research is to explore how newly qualified SENCo's experience the development of their professional identity. The purpose is to use an interpretative approach to understand at a deeper level how they experience and make sense of their evolving professional identities. It does not use quantitative analysis or seek to respond to a particular hypothesis nor to generate a new theory. Instead, the research aims to contribute new knowledge to the small body of existing literature regarding the professional identity of SENCo's. It is hoped that in this way the findings of this research will help those new to the profession and school leaders or wider policy makers when they are recruiting and supporting SENCo's through their careers.

### **1.4 Research questions**

The aims and purpose led to the research being focused on the following key research questions:

1. How do newly qualified SENCo's understand their professional identity?
2. Do newly qualified SENCo's understand their support needs and how are these met within or beyond their school?
3. How do newly qualified SENCo's link their professional identity to school, local and national policies and wider world views?

### **1.5 Research context**

The participants' appointments to the role of SENCo coincided with introduction of the 'new' Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) and all had recently completed the mandatory National Award for Special Educational Needs Co-ordination (NAS) (Education Act 2008; DfE/DoH, 2015). They were all based in the south-east of England but worked under three different local authorities, and one worked in an independent preparatory school. Within the CoP (DfE/DoH, 2015), duties for local authorities and governing bodies include both statutory ('must') statements and recommended guidance for best practice ('should' statements). Variation in policies and practices between school

and local authorities have been a source of contention in the past (HMSO, 2006; OFSTED, 2010; DfE, 2011) and this study will highlight similarities and differences experienced by participants in this region of England. These variations may be further exacerbated by the dichotomy for educational staff of satisfying the promotion of inclusive practices alongside increased choice for parents, a focus on increased attainment and continuing funding challenges in schools.

During my previous roles as a Local Authority SEN advisor and lecturer on a NASC course, and currently as an independent SEN consultant, I have been concerned about the turnover of SENCo's. There is currently no national data to confirm this, but literature (Pearson, 2008; Curran et al, 2018) has raised the issue of recruitment and retention and I wondered whether this is related to the development of SENCo professional identity. There is a wealth of literature about the concept of professional identity as a social construct and a significant and growing number of studies relating to the professional identity of teachers. These have shown the complexity of the concept of professional identity and the interplay of personal and social identities. There are however very few studies that have focused on the professional identity of SENCo's, with much of the literature considering the range of roles undertaken by a SENCo and how this has changed over time.

Through use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis this study highlights how newly qualified SENCo's experience their developing professional identities and mechanisms that either support or challenge this. This study adds to the extant literature in this field by providing a unique insight into the lived experience of SENCo's, who hold important, strategic roles in supporting their educational colleagues and working with parents and other agencies to meet the needs of children and young people with SEN.

### **1.6 Researcher's position**

I have been a teacher for about 25 years; many of those spent as a SENCo or Inclusion Manager. I 'became' a SENCo before the introduction of formal training for the role and learnt on the job. I have worked as a SEN advisor within a local authority, have taught on NASC and other university courses and in my current role as an independent SEN consultant continue to support new and experienced SENCo's. Throughout my career, I have constantly acquired new knowledge and skills, and remain passionate about the role and the impact that it can have on children and young people, their parents, and other colleagues within the profession and beyond.

While this research was in its infancy, I carefully considered my own position within it and how I would describe my own professional identity. This led me to the conclusion that I perceive myself as

an education practitioner and academic researcher, who, with many years of experience, may be considered an 'expert' in many areas of SEN education. However, in the context of this research, I have no such claim. In the last twenty years, there have been many changes in the field of education policy and practice which affect staff and pupils in a variety of ways. This research seeks to understand the realities of being a newly qualified SENCo and how this has impacted upon their professional identity, and therefore it is the participants who are the experts in the field.

### **1.7 Chapter summary**

The last forty years have seen significant changes in education for children and young people with SEN as policy and guidance have moved from segregated systems to the promotion of inclusive practices. To support this, the role of the SENCo has not only been introduced but has evolved to become one of a strategic leader and manager of whole-school systems. The status of the role has been raised through the requirement that the post holder completes a Master's level accreditation, and there is a recommendation that they are part of their school's leadership team.

Accepting that there have been difficulties with the recruitment and retention of educational staff for several years (NAHT, 2017) and that recent research shows that of those currently employed as SENCo about one third believe that they will not be in role in five years' time due to workload and financial restrictions (Curran *et al*, 2018), I believe that it is imperative to understand how the role is experienced by those who know best – the SENCo's themselves. Furthermore, as secure professional identity has been linked with career success (Slay and Smith, 2011), by understanding the supportive and protective factors that enable this we may be better placed to support colleagues who are new to role and to offer insight to those recruiting new staff.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Chapter overview

This literature review begins with an overview of the developments in Special Educational Needs (SEN) followed by the evolution of the role of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) and the policy contexts affecting it. I then present an exploration of existing literature on professional identity to support the reader in understanding the theoretical construct being researched. The final section focusses on the extant research available on the professional identity of SENCo's.

### 2.2 Developments in SEN

Educational provision has evolved over the last one hundred and fifty years. Warnock (DES 1978) outlined developments from an era of exclusion for those children deemed incapable of being educated, segregated education of children who were deaf or blind, followed by policies promoting integration through the provision of 'special classes' in some mainstream schools during the 1970's.

As a result of their enquiry, the term 'special educational needs' was proposed, stating that this was not regarding a particular disability of a child, 'but in relation to everything about him, his abilities as well as his disabilities – indeed all factors which have a bearing on his educational progress.' (DES, 1978:37). The Education Act (1981) endorsed most recommendations from the Warnock Report, including the introduction of Statements of SEN and promoted integration of all children into 'ordinary' or mainstream schools. With large class sizes and little teacher education on how to support children who had previously been taught in special classes, publication of the Education Act (1981) impacted teachers' practice and attitudes as they were encouraged to accept greater responsibility for pupils with SEN (Cowne, 2008).

Thirteen years later the *Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs* (DfE, 1994) was first introduced (hereafter: CoP, DfE, 1994). This defined children as having SEN if they had 'a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of the same age' or had 'a disability which prevents or hinders the child from making use of educational facilities provided for children of the same age' (DfE, 1994:5), a definition which remains largely unchanged today. The document outlined five stages of support including, if appropriate, a new document, called a 'Statement of Special Educational Needs' which would be completed by the local authority.

It also formally introduced the role of SENCo, which had been made statutory by the 1993 Education Act.

The CoP (DfE, 1994) was published around the same time that The World Conference on Special Needs Education was held in Salamanca, Spain in June 1994. With representatives of 92 governments, including nations of the UK, and 25 international organisations, 'The Salamanca Statement' (UNESCO, 1994) was signed calling for the right to education for all children, and for inclusion to be the norm. Subsequently, national policy and guidance documents (DfEE, 1997; DfEE/QCA, 1999) promoted inclusion asserting that responsibility for provision for children with SEN was 'a matter for the school as a whole' (DfES, 1994:7) through curriculum design and approaches made by schools and individual teachers.

Reflecting educational changes through adoption of the principles of inclusion, the Code of Practice was revised (DfES, 2001a) with greater emphasis on working in partnership with parents, pupils and other agencies. Other policy and guidance documents promoted inclusion, the removal of barriers to learning and improved collaboration between agencies (DfES, 2001b; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c). National Strategies documents increased the focus on supporting learners with SEN through a waves model and provision mapping (DfES, 2002; 2005; 2006) and inclusive teaching checklists (DfES, 2002; 2004d; 2005). Each document promoted whole school, shared responsibility for inclusion.

Despite international commitment to inclusion, Warnock, having been an initial proponent of this agenda, and others expressed growing concern that inclusion in mainstream schooling may not be the most appropriate education for all children (Warnock, 2005; MacBeath *et al*, 2006).

Furthermore, the *House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee Report on SEN* (HMSO, 2006) was highly critical about inclusion, special schools, the variation in provision for children with SEN and the statementing process. *The Lamb Inquiry: Special Educational Needs and Parental Confidence* (DCSF, 2009a) added to the discussions about the effectiveness of policy and practice and recommended changes focusing on a stronger voice for parents, child-centred processes, and greater accountability to ensure more effective services. Two further reviews (OFSTED, 2010; DfE, 2011) expressed concerns about variation in provision between schools and local authorities, and over-identification of SEN (which in some cases was felt to make up for poor teaching, to influence contextual value-added scores or due to financial motivation). These documents suggested measures to tackle these weaknesses and pledged stronger parental choice, reducing School Action and School Action Plus to a single school-based category of SEN to 'remove the bias towards inclusion' (DfE, 2011:17), and the introduction of Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans. These were hailed as 'radical' (*ibid*:15) reforms and many people working within education and other allied



services were concerned about the uncertainty and impact changes would have on their roles, even if they could understand the rationale behind them (Morewood, 2012). There was also concern that the proposed changes 'skewed sharply' (Robertson, 2012:79) towards children with a statement, rather than the majority of pupils with SEN but without a statement.

Following a lengthy consultation process which received intense interest in both professional literature and mainstream media, the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years* (DfE/DoH 2014) was published, providing statutory guidance to schools and other professionals on their responsibilities in meeting the needs of pupils with SEN. Following an update (DfE/DoH 2015), this document emphasises a child-centred approach which supports pupils and their parents to fully participate in decision-making that focuses on aspirational outcomes. The definition of SEN remains largely unchanged, although the 'level' of need is now categorised as one school-based level, known as 'SEN Support'. Statutory assessment now incorporates multi-agency working, creating an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), to reduce how often children and their parents need to share information and avoids duplication of meetings and resources. Additionally, the CoP (DfE/DoH, 2015) promotes an 'Assess, plan, do, review' cycle to support more accurate identification of need and monitoring to ensure support is effective. When concerns about over-identification were raised by OFSTED (2010), 18.3% of pupils were deemed to have SEN without a Statement of SEN (DfE 2018a). There was a marked reduction in this over six years, which incorporated the implementation of the current CoP, however the incidence of children with SEN has begun to rise in the last three years to 12.2% (DfE, 2021b). Similarly, while the number of children with a statement or EHCP had remained static at 2.8% of the school population from 2007-2017 (DfE, 2018b) this figure rose to 3.3% in January 2021 (DfE, 2021b).

### **2.3 The role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo)**

As outlined in Chapter 1, the primary focus of this research is to gain a better understanding into the lived experience of newly qualified SENCos.

#### **2.3.1 SENCo role and responsibilities**

The term Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) was made a statutory role in the 1993 Education Act, following which the CoP (DfE, 1994) formally stated that in mainstreams schools 'a designated teacher' (*ibid*:9) would undertake these duties. A caveat was added that the SENCo role may be taken on by another senior member of staff within a small school or may need to be part of a team in larger school (*ibid*:10). This meant the appointment of a new SENCo or additional

responsibility for an existing member of staff. Appointments were often internal, either by the incumbent 'SEN teacher' or another member of staff taking on additional responsibility with little additional time or training (Petersen, 2010).

The governing body and headteacher were ascribed responsibility for determining the school policy and provisions and the headteacher had 'responsibility for the day-to-day **management**' while working closely with the 'school's SEN coordinator or team.' (DfE, 1994:18). A subtle difference in wording indicated SENCo responsibility included 'the day-to-day **operation** of the school's SEN policy' (*ibid*:18) to coordinate provision for pupils with SEN. This resulted in significant administrative tasks including producing Individual Education Plans (IEPs), co-ordinating provision, supporting colleagues, liaison with external specialist services and applications for statutory assessment.

Four years later, *The National Standards for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators* (TTA, 1998) documented effective strategies to aid coordination of SEN provision. This highlighted the need for understanding and support from the headteacher and leadership team (Hallett and Hallett, 2017) alongside additional knowledge, skills, attributes, and expertise. These standards remained embedded in the CoP (DfES, 2001a). While recognising the intention to contribute to CPD, criticisms included its neglect to consider the emotional impact of the role or the contribution of critical reflection on personal beliefs and decision-making (Davies and Lee, 2001).

While the CoP (DfE, 1994) had required a 'designated teacher' to take on the role of the SENCo, in the revised version (DfES, 2001a) the term 'responsible person' (*ibid*:20) was used, and the glossary only refers to 'a member of staff' (*ibid*:212). Although it may be assumed that this person was a teacher, clarity had been lost and this was not the case in every school (Petersen, 2010).

The revised CoP (DfES, 2001a) outlined the role of the SENCo for Early Years, Primary and Secondary stages of education. While maintaining the SENCo's responsibility for day-to-day operation of the SEN policy, the notion of strategic involvement was also aired. In addition to co-ordinating provision, there was focus on providing support and guidance to colleagues to secure 'high quality teaching for children with SEN' (*ibid*:56; 71). This coincided with an increase in the number of non-teaching staff employed to support children with SEN (TAs), who were to be line-managed by the SENCo (Petersen, 2010). Whether the SENCo was a qualified teacher or not, advising large numbers of teachers and TAs and fulfilling line-management roles was a deviation to previous remits and challenging to some post-holders (Norwich, 2010).

An increased managerial focus, led to a spotlight on rigorous monitoring and target setting for the SENCo with the headteacher and leadership team. Linked to the inclusion agenda, this encouraged

whole-school data analysis rather than looking at data for pupils with SEN in isolation. Development of whole school tracking systems and use of Pupil Progress Meetings aided some SENCos in working effectively with school leaders, while in other schools, such integrated systems remained lacking.

The *Education (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators) (England) Regulations (2008)* confirmed that the SENCo must be a qualified teacher who was employed at the school. In 2009 an amendment added that those new to post must complete a statutory training course accredited at Master's level, "The National Award for Special Educational Needs Co-ordination" (DCSF, 2009b). These requirements highlighted the professional qualities required to effectively carry out the role, particularly regarding supporting the professional development of other members of staff. These requirements are reiterated in the current CoP (DfE/DoH, 2015), meaning that the SENCo is now the only position in a school requiring mandatory training beyond qualified teacher status (QTS).

Within the current CoP (DfE/DoH, 2015), the central remit of coordinating provision, providing professional guidance to colleagues and working closely with staff, parents and other agencies to ensure appropriate support given is maintained. However, there is increased focus on outcomes through implementing assess, plan, do, review cycles which are most efficient when linked to whole school systems (Ekins and Grimes, 2009), enhancing the profile of the SENCo. Additionally, through the local Offer, the SENCo is required to highlight other local provisions and advice to pupils, parents, colleagues and other professionals. While shared responsibility for meeting the needs of pupils with SEN has featured in each CoP, the current version added strategic responsibilities and it is through training staff and liaison with the leadership team that the SENCo can rationalise the two components to form a cohesive whole-school practice (Ekins, 2015).

With an increasingly strategic focus, the CoP (DfE/DoH, 2015) acknowledges that the SENCo 'will be most effective in that role if they are part of the school leadership team' (*ibid*:108) although this is not a 'must' (statutory) statement and therefore represents suggested best practice. While some SENCos are part of the leadership team, there are many who are not (Ekins, 2015). As membership of the leadership team is often linked to status and having greater influence within a school, lack of membership could be challenging for SENCos whose responsibilities increasingly include analysis of needs and progress, the efficient deployment of resources and monitoring of staff including performance management and professional development, however Hallett and Hallett (2017) contend that it is acting as an agent for change, not positional leadership that is important.

Previous CoPs (DfE, 1994; DfES, 2001a) required schools to publish a SEN policy and present an annual SEN report to the school's governing body. In addition, all schools are now required to publicly publish a SEN Information report (DfE/DoH, 2015) stating how they identify, assess and

support pupils with SEN. Local Authorities have provided templates, but ultimately it often falls to the SENCo to complete this (quite large) document and to review it annually. Advice suggests that this, alongside policy review should involve all stakeholders (Ekins, 2015), which while promoting shared responsibility and raising SEN as a whole-school agenda, can also be more time-consuming.

No definition of the role of SENCo has included working directly with pupils, rather it has focused on co-ordinating, supporting, liaising and training, and more recently with strategically leading and managing (Edwards, 2016). Table 1 visually demonstrates aspects of the role that have remained static and those that have evolved over time. This highlights how the language has changed and the role now incorporates greater responsibility for strategic working. The order in which the responsibilities appear in the CoPs has been changed to allow comparison between each version.

Table 1: Main responsibilities of the SENCo.

DfE, 1994: 20-21	DfES 2001:56	DfE/ DoH 2015:108-9
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy</li> <li>coordinating provision for children with SEN</li> <li>liaising with and advising fellow teachers</li> <li>contributing to the in-service training of staff</li> <li>maintaining the school's SEN register and overseeing the records on all pupils with special educational needs</li> <li>liaising with parents of children with special educational needs</li> <li>liaising with external agencies including the educational psychology service and /or support agencies, medical and social services and voluntary bodies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>overseeing the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy</li> <li>coordinating provision for children with SEN</li> <li>liaising with and advising fellow teachers</li> <li>contributing to the in-service training of staff</li> <li>managing learning support assistants (primary school) or managing the SEN team of teachers and learning support assistants (secondary school)</li> <li>overseeing the records of all children with special educational needs</li> <li>liaising with parents of children with special educational needs</li> <li>liaising with external agencies including the LEA's support and educational psychology services, health and social services, and voluntary bodies and, in secondary schools, the Connexions PA.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>overseeing the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy</li> <li>co-ordinating provision for children with SEN</li> <li>advising on the graduated approach to providing SEN support</li> <li>advising on the deployment of the school's delegated budget and other resources to meet pupils' needs effectively</li> <li>liaising with the relevant Designated Teacher where a looked after pupil has SEN</li> <li>ensuring that the school keeps the records of all pupils with SEN up to date</li> <li>liaising with parents of pupils with SEN</li> <li>liaising with early years providers, other schools, educational psychologists, health and social care professionals, and independent or voluntary bodies</li> <li>being a key point of contact with external agencies, especially the local authority and its support services</li> <li>liaising with potential next providers of education to ensure a pupil and their parents are informed about options and a smooth transition is planned</li> <li>working with the headteacher and school governors to ensure that the school meets its responsibilities under the Equality Act (2010) with regard to reasonable adjustments and access arrangements</li> </ul>

### **2.3.2 Evolution of the role linked to changes in relation to SEN and other educational policies and wider world views.**

With the creation of the role of SENCo (DfE, 1994) and policies changing to promote inclusion, some schools found the SENCo role to be 'onerous and in many cases untenable' (Petersen, 2010:13). The practice of inclusion stretched the SENCo as they sought to support colleagues who in some cases felt ill-equipped to meet the needs of pupils who would formerly not have been educated in mainstream schools. As more pupils with additional needs entered mainstream education, SENCos were required to co-ordinate more provision and to liaise with more external specialists.

Many policy and guidance documents have been published outlining strategies to support inclusion of pupils with SEN (DfES, 2001b; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c). National Strategies documents promoted a waves model and provision mapping (DfES, 2002; 2005; 2006), inclusive teaching checklists (DfES, 2002; 2004d; 2005) and later the Inclusion Development Programme (DCFS, 2008) to support high quality teaching. Other reviews relating to speech, language and communication (Bercow, 2008), reading (Rose, 2009) and phonics (Wyse and Bradbury, 2022), also made recommendations to support teaching and learning. These documents promoted whole school responsibility and could be seen as a positive opportunity to 'raise the status' (Petersen, 2010:15) or evolve the SENCo role towards a professional, managerial style, however, others contended that it raised tension as the SENCo's responsibilities were dispersed (Oldham and Radford, 2011). While inclusion, whole school responsibility and personalisation were promoted, providing an 'exciting developmental scene' (Morewood, 2012:74), some SENCos began turning to the online SENCo-forum to deal with the sense of isolation they felt in their setting (Lewis and Ogilvie, 2003) as their role began focusing on providing support and training for colleagues and monitoring the attainment and progress of pupils.

The evolution of inclusive practices coincided with increasing policy pressure to improve attainment. SENCos often found themselves in challenging positions, torn between meeting the needs of pupils with SEN, contributing to attainment data and meeting prescribed professional standards (TTA, 1998), often without time to fulfil the role or recourse to training (Petersen, 2010). While there was a drive for inclusion and shared responsibility for SEN, many SENCos were struggling with excessive workload and bureaucratic burden (Gross, 2013) despite the introduction of provision maps at least five years previously. Whole school systems (Ekins and Grimes, 2009) were not always evident, and Gross maintained that there remained a need to develop these to reduce paperwork and enable the SENCo to hold a strategic management position. Further tension is caused through use of attainment data meaning that even when effective strategies have enabled pupils with SEN to make good progress, there can be challenge regarding the SENCos' actions and schools at risk of being seen as

'failing'. Progress data and evidence to show that the gap between pupils with SEN and those with no identified SEN is closing can be a positive indicator of the effectiveness of SEN provision and is more beneficial to a SENCo.

As the SENCo role was evolving to enable post-holders to be a strategic 'agent for change' (Cowne, 2008:12; Hallett and Hallett, 2017), criticisms about inconsistency in the identification of SEN (OFSTED, 2004) and inclusion and the pressure to educate all pupils with SEN in mainstream schools (Warnock, 2005; Macbeath *et al*, 2006) caused some challenges. These discussions fuelled tensions within schools and local authorities as professionals and parents sought to meet the needs of all pupils. For SENCos who had been directed to work in partnership with parents and other agencies and to promote the role of pupil voice (DfES, 2001a), the changing discourse on inclusion caused pressure at the interface of these relationships.

Outcomes of *The Lamb Inquiry* (DCSF, 2009a) focused on strategies to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEN through a child-centred approach with support to enable an even stronger voice for parents and pupils, and more accountable systems to deliver better services. Petersen (2010) acknowledged that the recommendations would impact schools and place additional responsibilities on SENCos including being able to guide and direct staff, and to liaise with a wider range of stakeholders.

Successive versions of the CoP (DfE, 1994; DfES, 2001a; DfE/DoH, 2015) have increasingly promoted a person-centred approach, with greater voice and choice for parents and pupils, emphasis on early identification and 'high quality teaching' and greater collaboration between education, health and social care services (Hallett and Hallett, 2017). This is accepted and laudable to improve outcomes for children and young people, but does impact on the role of the SENCo, where many are expected to take the lead (Ekins, 2015) when organising and administrating multi-agency meetings and in supporting all stakeholders to negotiate communication which does not always have shared language. There is a need to address this imbalance so that the most appropriate person takes the role of lead professional which may be aided through greater multi-agency training opportunities and development of shared language and purpose (*ibid*).

Although definitions of SEN have been largely stable over the last 25 years, variation between schools and local authorities in the identification of SEN have been well documented (OFSTED, 2010; DfE, 2011). More recent emphasis on disability through addition of relevant duties under the Equality Act 2010 and Mental Capacity Act 2005 may further perpetuate confusion as clarification of terminology has not been provided (Ekins, 2015). Furthermore, changing the category of SEN known as Behavioural, Social and Emotional Difficulties (BESD) to Social, Emotional and Mental Health

(SEMH) caused concern for some SENCos, other education professionals and wider agencies, who voiced concern about being responsible for the identification of, and provision for, mental health needs (Hellawell, 2015). As SENCos are supposed to have knowledge which they can then use to support colleagues in their professional development, this became (and continues to be) a source of anxiety particularly at a time when awareness of mental health and wellbeing is at the forefront of both the mainstream media and educational discourse. Robertson (2012) also conjectured that if assessment and support focused on the minority (those requiring an EHCP), SENCos would be left to work creatively to meet the needs of the majority. He also highlighted that while focussing on improving outcomes and attainment, there was also a need to consider wider opportunities for participation in appropriate curriculums, adding to the SENCo role.

From the outset, variation in the role of the SENCo has occurred as the CoP (DfE, 1994) outlined statutory duties for Local Authorities and Schools and then assigned responsibility to the governing body and headteacher to determine how they would interpret this in policy and practice. Given the range of special educational needs, abilities and other demographics that constitute a school population, the remit of SENCos has been shown to vary considerably between schools (Hallett and Hallett, 2010) and further impacted by different interpretations (Hallett and Hallett, 2017).

This is exacerbated through perceived injustices in relation to the time allocated to the role (Cowne, 2005; Mackenzie, 2007; Qureshi, 2014) and pay associated with it – some have reported receiving no additional funding (Pearson, 2008; Curran *et al*, 2018). Each revision of the CoP (DfE, 1994; DfES, 2001a; DfE/DoH, 2015) gives Governors responsibility to consider these factors and yet day-to-day aspects of the role prevent more strategic development (Pearson; 2008) and many SENCos have report feeling swamped by paperwork (Cole, 2005; Curran *et al*, 2018). A workforce survey (Curran *et al*, 2018) highlighted that these concerns persist due to excessive workload, additional roles that they hold or needing to cover for other staff; several stated that they often work an additional day a week above their contracted hours. Furthermore, responses indicated that time allocations and additional support available to support the SENCo varied across settings suggesting that while the workforce may be bound by one title, SENCo, their experiences are divergent.

It has also been suggested that schools may find it effective if the SENCo is a member of the leadership team (DfES, 2001; DfE/DoH, 2015) and have an appropriate environment in which to work. In reality, this still varies widely (Pearson and Ralph, 2007; Szwed, 2007; Ekins, 2015; Dobson, 2019), with the focus for many remaining on management duties, rather than leadership (Layton, 2005; Pearson, 2008; Pearson *et al*, 2015). This causes tensions due to perceived lack of capacity to enable change.



During the SEN consultation (DfE, 2011), persistent and considerable variation both in roles enacted (Rosen-Webb, 2011) and in SENCo's status and influence within schools (Griffiths and Dubsky, 2012; Qureshi, 2014) were evident. While some had suggested that the role of the SENCo within an inclusion agenda is too wide and requires either greater dissemination of responsibility among all staff (Norwich 2010) or a distributed leadership model (Hallett and Hallett, 2010), others concluded that the CoP (DfE, 2001a) 'very much aligned with managerial responsibilities' (Pearson *et al*, 2015:48) and SENCos welcomed the shift towards a leadership role. Although there had been an increase in the number of SENCos holding a leadership position (*ibid*), many were not afforded this status and yet had whole school responsibilities, including directing colleagues. This left many SENCos in an isolated position of both operational and strategic duties but potentially leading and managing colleagues who are afforded higher status within the school hierarchy.

The National Award in SEN Co-ordination (NASC) was an initiative aimed to raise the status of the SENCo, to aid those who were new to the role in understanding the principles underpinning the CoP and to equip them with the skills necessary to effect change in schools (Ekins, 2015). Between 2009-2014 providers were nationally accredited and the course was centrally funded. Robertson (2012) recognised that proposed changes to SEN policy would inevitably impact on the role of the SENCO and queried the provision and capacity for professional development, noting that 'the long-term future' of SENCo training was 'uncertain' (*ibid*, p80). This premonition proved correct as national accreditation and central funding ceased in 2014. Recognising the need for the continued high standards and quality afforded by the course, previously accredited providers formed a Provider Network Group and in March 2018 formed the 'Leading Learning for Special Educational Needs Community Interest Group'; Dobson (2019) stated there are over 30 providers, demonstrating continued demand for places.

Two small-scale studies (Pearson and Gathercole, 2011; Griffiths and Dubsky, 2012) considered the impact of the NASC Award course and found that networking, studying together, better integration of theory and practice, supportive management, schools who had a commitment to CPD, shared responsibilities with colleagues and links with external specialists contributed to positive outcomes. Griffiths and Dubsky (2012) used the analogy of moving novice SENCos from 'gardeners' to 'landscapers' (*ibid*:170). This showed that despite the multiplicity of changes placed upon schools, and particularly SENCos, social aspects of learning and working were positive factors to enable change and development of practice. However, they also noted that the requirements of the course were felt to add to the already heavy workload. It is therefore important to be mindful of the pressures on early career SENCo's as they balance the role of being a SENCo, with mandatory academic studies, alongside other responsibilities in their professional and personal lives. Through a



Freedom of Information Request, Dobson (2019) showed that no data is collected to show how many SENCo's hold NASC Award and without this evidence he suggested SENCo's may lack engagement with critical thinking at Master's level.

Workforce surveys (Pearson, 2008; Pearson and Mitchell, 2013) have shown how some of the changes in policy and guidance have affected recruitment and retention. Both indicated that a large proportion of respondents intended to leave the profession or move on; these were summarised by Pearson as reflecting 'a greying of the profession' (2008:106), work-related factors (lack of job satisfaction, heavy workload and professional challenges) and the use of the SENCo role as a 'stepping stone' in career progression. Pearson and Mitchell (2013) added tensions with pay allowance but also noted that more SENCo's reported being on the Senior Management Team, had better induction and had completed accredited qualifications. The surveys demonstrated that participants entered the role with a range of qualifications, through internal and external advertisements, or because there was no-one else available to do the job. It was predicted that there was liable to be continued recruitment and retention difficulties in the medium term. Further research by Pearson *et al* (2015) demonstrated positive attitudes regarding greater involvement of parents and whole school responsibilities. However, SENCo's voiced concerns about an erosion of their role in the process of statutory assessment, increased bureaucracy linked to accountability data and 'intensification' (*ibid*:54) of pressures on the role due to reduced funding and access to local authority resources. Most of the SENCo's surveyed did not think that the proposed changes would lead to improvements in pupils' learning.

Educational policy changes have affected many people working in education, particularly those working as SENCo's. Writing about the issues of recruitment and retention of SENCo's in *Headteacher Update*, Sobel (2016) stated:

'We have walked slap-bang into a national crisis and no-one seems to have woken up to this problem or is doing anything about it.'

There has been persistent difficulty in recruitment across the education sector, particularly for middle leadership positions including SENCo's (NAHT, 2017). The challenge has been attributed to a lack of quality applicants, shortage of staff in the area, the growing accountability framework, budget pressures and cost of housing. More recently, a national survey looking at the impact of SENCo workload (Curran *et al*, 2018) showed that while 34% intend to remain in role, 30% stated that they are unlikely to be SENCo's within 5 years, again citing excessive workload and funding pressures as reasons for leaving a role, that 71% say they enjoy. Tensions between wanting to support pupils with SEN and the practical realities of the job were resulting in feelings of frustration

and stress. This has serious implications both for individuals and for educational work forces if these trends continue, a concern that seems to have been noted by the government, who called for a tender to provide strategic support to the workforce in mainstream and special schools (DfE, 2018b).

Through a small scale, two-year study, Reid and Soan (2018) explored the impact of supervision for senior leaders and SENCos. They noted the importance of structured, independent, confidential supervision with a suitably skilled supervisor to give participants time to reflect, which benefited aspects of both their personal and professional lives and supported them to use reflection between sessions. The authors concluded that this had aided professional safety, resilience, and development to support these professionals in their roles. As recruitment and retention to the role of SENCo continues to be an area of challenge, this may be a supportive factor.

The role of the SENCo has now been defined in three Codes of Practice but each time, the people holding the role of SENCo have had to negotiate changing policies, guidance and relationships. While each revision of advice or policy is undertaken with the best of intentions, inevitably, at times, lack of clarity, knowledge or disagreement with the underpinning ethos has resulted in tensions for SENCos. Curran *et al* (2018) describe the SENCo as the 'central actor' (*ibid*:10) who has to navigate changes in policies and additionally find themselves providing services that were previously available through local authorities which is again likely to impact upon retention of the workforce.

The profile of inclusion and supporting learners with additional needs was raised around the world following the signing of the '*The Salamanca Statement*' (UNESCO, 1994). Due to cultural and legislative differences between (and within) countries, access to inclusive education and the training provided for teachers continues to vary (Hodkinson, 2019). As seen in England, this is further compounded by 'terminological ambiguity' (*ibid*:175) and discussions about placement.

Internationally, evolving policies surrounding SEN and inclusion have led to the creation of roles akin to a SENCo in other countries, however differences have also been noted. In Sweden, the 'special pedagogue' (Lindqvist, 2013:198) requires at least 3 years teaching experience and a postgraduate qualification but the role varies between municipalities with most, but not all, based in schools. This contrasts with America, where most children with SEN are taught in mainstream schools and Special Teacher Education is at undergraduate level (Lindqvist, 2013). In Ireland the SENCo role is a fairly new concept which is largely operational and without formal recognition (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017). Within this research, discussions centre around the English policy context due to the unique nature of the SENCo role in England although it is considered likely that this research will provide perspectives which are internationally useful.

## 2.4 Professional Identity

### 2.4.1 The Building Blocks of Professional Identity

Identity has long been considered a social construction (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959) where self-concept (identity or 'who we are') has developed through modelling and identification with others (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Cooley referred to this construction as the 'looking-glass self' (1902:152). The distinct evolution of study within sociology and psychology and latterly the combined approach of social psychology has focussed on a definition of identity which is based upon social identity (recognition within a social role or group membership) and personal identity (character traits, abilities, values and interests) (Gecas, 1982; Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

The social concept of learning (Wenger, 1998), suggests that identity can be defined through learning, experiencing, doing and belonging, ideas reflected in Ibarra's (1999) model for development of professional identity. This included observing role models to identify potential identities, experimenting with our 'provisional selves' and then evaluating and adjusting our views and behaviours based on internal and external feedback. These views imply an element of [conscious or unconscious] self-reflection, although also infer a state of stability once professional identity has been determined.

Two studies focused on the professional identity of teachers (Beijaard *et al*, 2000; 2004), concluded that a single definition of professional identity was difficult. However, the later study identified four significant features affecting the development of professional identity:

- It is part of an 'ongoing process' which links with the concept of CPD.
- It implies personal and contextual factors, given that individuals who are affected by their own values and views have to work within professional standards.
- It is composed of 'sub-identities' and conflicts are likely to occur when a person is new to the profession or when there are policy or environmental changes.
- A sense of 'agency' is important – individuals need to be active within the process of professional development.

While reflecting previous work on the complexity and the social aspect of identity, Beijaard *et al* (2004) are making more explicit statements about the ongoing process of professional identity construction and the importance of agency within this. Furthermore, they alluded to an aspirational element of professional identity, that is, not just a person identifying who they are, but also who they may wish to become.

Slay and Smith (2011) suggest that professional identity may be described as 'one's professional self-concept based on attributes, values, motives and experiences' (p86). Although providing a definition of the concept, this does not mean that either all or any professionals are easily able to define their identity, as multiple factors are at play simultaneously. Intrinsic characteristics and historical experiences also affect individual development of moral values, personality and social maturity, suggesting a diverse range of influences that are consciously or unconsciously affecting development of our identities.

Far from just those internal factors, it is the interplay with other people and the environment in which people work that helps determine professional identity. Slay and Smith (2011) reviewed studies on professional identity construction and found it to be affected by three main factors:

- an individual's understanding of the profession based on socialisation and rhetoric
- how an individual alters their professional identity during career transition
- our life experiences, as well as those at work, affect identity.

#### **2.4.2 Evidence of tensions in professional identity construction**

Definitions of professional identity and discussions of how it is constructed suggest that alongside beliefs and attitudes, professionals will develop an understanding about the structures and boundaries in which they work, and the accepted and expected way they will interact with others within and beyond their own workplace. However, if there is not comprehensive understanding or acceptance of the constituent parts, this can lead to the lack of a clear professional identity (Beijaard *et al* 2000; 2004) which may affect those who are new to a profession.

Haber and Lingard (2001) found that while experienced physicians could alter their communication depending on their audience, students in the profession tended to use the same language and format regardless of who they were speaking with. This suggested that some novices can be slow to pick up on learning behaviours that are integral to the profession, and this is likely to affect the way in which they interact with colleagues. Similarly, while a degree of professional identity was noted to be present in many health and social care students before they began their courses, there was significant variation between the different disciplines, with identity amongst physiotherapy students being strongest (Adams *et al*, 2006). This suggests that lack of experience and nuances between roles within an organisation or type of profession may not be obvious to those who are applying or new to a role and may constitute a challenge to the development of their professional identity.

Where reflection does occur, whether conscious or unconscious, discourse between professionals can result in identities being reviewed and reconstructed. Bleakley (2006) considered how rhetoric between members of operating teams showed hierarchical positions and associated attitudes affected relationships and people reconsidering their positions within the profession. While general discourse can have some impact, the presence of power relationships or dominant organisational views can lead individuals to submit to pre-conceived identities (Dooreward and Brouns, 2003). As new or less experienced members enter a team, dissent from the expected norms can be eliminated by existing members or routines.

When professionals find themselves in challenging or ambiguous situations, they may question their own views as conflict between social and personal identities arise, particularly those who are new to the profession and are still constructing their identity. Niemi (1997) reported that at the outset of their training, very few medical students could demonstrate 'committed reflection', possibly due to a lack of 'mature thinking' skills. At the end of their training (after 6 years), many still had confused professional identities. Both Wenger (1998) and Ibarra (1999) proposed models requiring a level of self-reflection for development of professional identities suggesting that without this skill, those new to many professions may find it difficult to construct a secure identity.

Key factors affecting new teachers' professional identity have been shown to include personal experience, the impact of (or gap between) pre-service training and practise, and, significantly, the context in which they were working; this included knowledge of the setting, colleagues and pupils and their experience of support, leadership and an effective induction programme (Flores and Day, 2006). For some, context proved a significant challenge to participants' personal histories, which negatively affected the development of their professional identity. In contrast, a study of two school principals who had recently moved settings demonstrated a positive impact on their professional identity through the interplay between their personal identities and new contexts (Notman, 2017), perhaps due to the strength of their existing identity and a level of agency over the career move. These studies suggest that both personal biographies and social contexts influence development of professional identities. From newly qualified teachers to school principals, shaping and re-shaping of professional identities over time was supported through developing reflective thinking on personal histories and the school context and the use of an induction programme focused on professional development.

Professional identity has been defined as being constituted of both social and personal factors each of which are affected by a plethora of attributes and concepts. The idea of 'caring' was explained by O'Connor (2008) through the perspective of three teachers, concluding that tensions might arise

when a school considers teachers to be 'service providers' and overlooks the personal and individual nature of the job. It is less clear whether she felt that teachers intrinsically 'care' or whether this aspect of their professional identity develops over time.

Slay and Smith (2011) describe professional identity construction as 'dynamic', but also conclude that it is affected by the relationship between self-concept, views of the profession, and stigma. While their research focused on journalists, they stated that it could be generalised to other professions. This would seem pertinent to any commonly known career choices, including the role of SENCo, such that the professional identity may be affected by how the person perceives themselves, the views of the profession by others (teachers, parents or other agencies), and the stigma that may be associated with special educational needs. While an individual has agency (to some extent) over their self-concept, they have less control over the other factors and this could prove highly challenging particularly at the outset of a new professional role.

While Beijaard *et al* (2004) note the importance of developing a stable and positive professional identity as a significant factor in the success experienced by new teachers, Ballantyne and Zhukov state that some teachers leave the profession due to 'praxis shock' (2017:241) whereby their expectations of the profession do not reflect the realities. Not only must this be devastating to the teacher, but they also note that it means 'the investment of time, money and social capital that contributes to their training is not fully realised' (*ibid*:250). Having recognised some of the factors that detract from the development of professional identity, it is imperative that professions, settings and individuals identify supportive factors in professional identity development and engage with recommendations to ensure more positive experience of career development.

### **2.4.3 Supportive factors in the development of professional identity**

Trede (2012) explored how the role of 'work-integrated learning (WIL)' could support development of professional identity. She found that a 'professional journey' began when students in workplace settings were actively involved in discussions with other professionals about appropriate actions or decisions and given the opportunity to critically reflect upon practice as part of a professional community. This reflects Ibarra's (1999) model and could support the notion that within a given context, working with others, and seeing shared beliefs and attitudes, through verbal and non-verbal communication, can aid development of professional identity.

Other literature suggested a more direct approach is required. For some professions, where students were slower to develop an understanding of professional values and experiences, explicit teaching may be a more appropriate strategy to aid the development of professional identity (Haber and

Lingard, 2001). In some cases, students may be well versed in their experiences and link this with their emotions but make little reference to learning, doing or belonging (Timostuk and Ugase, 2010). In these cases, an alternative strategy may be to place greater emphasis on the social aspect of training to develop an understanding of the learning process and enhance the feeling of support from belonging to a professional body or having timely mentoring and early professional development (Ballantyne and Zhukov, 2017). Some professions support this notion through provision of a work-based mentor or buddy who may be an experienced colleague in the field or a 'coach' from a different area of the organisation or even beyond.

Elements of Wenger's (1998) model have been explored in studies of teachers' professional identity. One found that 'structural determinants' (Malvern and Skidmore, 2001:28) such as length of service, gender, position in a school were more important than consensus within a school, while another noted that positive self-perception and a whole school focus on raising standards (Beijaard et al, 2004) was more important. Positive self-perception was noted to help outweigh negative feelings, such as poor working conditions and, where schools were striving to raise standards, it was more likely that teachers developed a keen sense of professional identity through shared goals and sense of belonging.

Career success is often linked with the successful construction of professional identity (Slay and Smith, 2011). This can be demonstrated by correlation between those people who hold leadership roles and those who hold strong organizational views and values. When individuals change the organisation for whom they work, it may be their sense of agency over that decision and the ability to ratify their personal biography with the new organisation (Notman, 2017) that helps to maintain their secure identity. This suggests that supporting the development of a clear, strong professional identity could enable greater success for the individual it affects, while 'leaving professional identity formation up to 'osmosis' is a risky undertaking' (Trede, 2012:160).

This discussion has shown that professional identity is a complex phenomenon comprising internal factors such as experience, knowledge, skills and beliefs (Beijaard et al, 2004; Flores and Day, 2006) and external, socially constructed elements (Slay and Smith, 2011) which are impacted upon by personal and professional relationships, and policy contexts.

## **2.5 The Professional Identity of SENCOs**

While there was a plethora of literature about identity and professional identity in general, there was very little literature focusing on the professional identity of SENCOs, and within the documents

identified, much related to the roles that SENCo's undertake. Here there could be misunderstanding due to language interpretation, with some considering the word 'role' to be the jobs that are undertaken, while others may presume that it is the personas or identities that are assumed. Hallett and Hallett (2018) presented initial findings of their research, but no other literature specifically related to newly qualified SENCo's.

Studies exploring the role of the SENCo have demonstrated varying levels of consensus or homogeneity amongst those in role (Cole, 2005; Szwed, 2007; Oldham and Radford, 2011; Qureshi, 2014). It is a role that is defined in regulations and policies, however, beyond statutory duty, it is open to local interpretation. Dobson and Douglas (2018) suggest that SENCo role construction can be explained by describing the influence of proximal relationships within and beyond the educational setting. They discuss how the factors which constitute professional identity such as experience, motivation, values and attributes can be impacted upon through the environments in which SENCo's work, highlighting both supportive and challenging elements. While Crisp *et al* (2006) emphasise the importance of paying attention to personal identity rather than 'simple affirmation of professional identity' (*ibid*:610), both concur that professional identity is constituted of social and personal factors, but the import given to the influence of each is a matter of debate.

SENCo's perceptions of their role usually focus on the jobs that are undertaken, while also giving insight into features of their identities. Woolhouse (2015) noted that about 90% of respondents were female, experienced teachers in the middle of their careers and commented that this was reflective of the wider SENCo population. As no statistical career data for SENCo's is currently published, this assumption must be based on experience and reference to other literature but would suggest that the role of SENCo is a homogenous group in terms of age and gender, which may be 'problematic' (*ibid*:142) in terms of how SENCo's are perceived. In contrast, language used incorporates both feminine and masculine descriptors of the role, such as 'caring warriors' (*ibid*:754), 'fire-fighters' and using a 'magic wand' (Layton, 2005:55). This demonstrates the range of tasks and personas that may be applicable to the role of SENCo.

Kearns (2005) conceptualised the SENCo role as including arbiter, rescuer, auditor, collaborator and expert. Ten years later, Cheminais (2015) highlighted that the role faced different opportunities and challenges due to policy changes and suggested that it incorporates strategic leader, adviser, capacity builder, collaborator, quality assurer and advocate. Both highlight the multi-faceted nature of the role and suggested that the development of a SENCo model may assist recruiters and trainers by demonstrating the different ways of enacting the role. More recently, IPA has been used to consider the experience of new and experienced SENCo's in relation to Kearns model and the



changing policy context in which they work (Hallett and Hallett, 2018). Early findings suggest that the role is more nuanced, particularly for more experienced SENCos who also recognise the impact of environments that do not support teaching and learning.

While all the literature reviewed touched on the variability of the role, there was also notable tension between SENCos who are used to 'managing' and 'running' (Layton, 2005:55) SEN provision while recognising the strategic leadership (Cheminais, 2015; Woolhouse, 2015) dimensions to their role. Many acknowledged that they are impeded through not being recognised as part of the school's leadership team (Layton, 2005; Rosen-Webb, 2011). There has been persistent rhetoric regarding the language of leadership and management and the literature suggests this is continuing to impact on how SENCos perceive themselves to be able to work and on how the role is seen within and beyond the school (Pearson and Ralph, 2007).

While some studies have interchangeably used language, Rosen-Webb (2011) divided her findings into 'SENCo identity and values' and 'SENCo roles' and found that while varied routes had led towards the SENCo role, there was strong evidence of the influence of family background and early school experiences. Values deemed most important included an interest in how pupils learn, integrity and optimism (*ibid*) which 'resonate with notions of moral purpose within a community of inclusive practice' (Layton, 2005:58). Other supportive attributes may include being patient, caring and empathetic (Woolhouse 2015) and their 'hopes and aspirations' (Dobson and Douglas, 2018:17) should not be under-estimated, rather they need to be well understood by headteachers in order to make successful appointments and retain SENCos.

Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) used questionnaires to explore aspects of the role of SENCo in Northern Ireland amid SEN policy change. From 27 respondents, they found that 26 held other roles, in addition to that of SENCo. Only 9 saw SENCo as their main responsibility. It was felt that this affected their ability to conceptualise the SENCo identity, although those with other leadership roles did express greater capacity to use their leadership skills to promote inclusive practice.

Rosen-Webb (2011) suggested that her participants 'were continually *becoming* a SENCo while *being* a SENCo' and showed that they held characteristics of 'people who care about and act on behalf of others' (*ibid*:165). In her conclusion she stated that SENCos all had 'the best interests of their pupils at heart' and identify with 'attributes of empathy, working within boundaries and challenges, maintaining positive relationships and being transparent in communication.' (*ibid*:166). Findings of the study reinforced Kearns (2005) four descriptors and Rosen-Webb summarised that:

*'Ideally a SENCo is a trained and experienced teacher who has:*

- *The professional skills to direct and co-ordinate provision;*
- *The management skills and expertise to enact positive change;*
- *The personal skills and commitment to engage, enthuse and lead others.'*

Rosen-Webb, 2011:166

Furthermore, the rhetoric illustrates how 'intelligible identity' evolves, not only due to personal characteristics, but through individuals claiming 'ownership of SENCo identity by engaging with the conventions associated with this role' (Woolhouse, 2015:143).

The perceptions of the role by others in the learning community has been identified as a risk factor in development of SENCo professional identity (Pearson and Ralph, 2007). SENCos indicated greatest concern about staff within their school lacking understanding about the level of work undertaken with outside agencies; this may be due to the time they have to spend on these tasks or the perceived importance of working in a multi-agency profession.

It has long been acknowledged that 'teaching takes place in both the heart and the head' (MacBeath *et al*, 2006:14), however, until recently, little notice has been taken regarding the emotional impact on teachers. Both positive and negative emotions were identified by SENCos as affecting them in their role (Mackenzie, 2012) and while not everyone experienced emotions in the same way, local networks were identified as a positive support for SENCos who had shared the necessity of hiding emotions and that they felt more isolated in their role the longer that they were in post. This reflects findings from research into the impact of participation in an email SENCo forum; in addition to sharing practical support, users demonstrated heterogeneous conceptions of the role and high message senders tended to identify more with the email group, suggesting stronger social identification within this defined professional body (Lewis and Ogilvie, 2003; Lewis and Crisp, 2004; Crisp *et al*, 2006).

Hellawell (2018) described professional identity as being 'reaffirmed or remade in response to policy innovation and...shaped by professional standards.' (*ibid*:166), which, she suggests, relate to professional actions, rather than enacting the 'intellectual and attitudinal' development of individuals. She explored SENCos early experiences of working with the SEN CoP (DfE/DoH, 2015) and identified how the dynamics of policy and practice can 'change – and sometimes undermine – professional confidence and identities' (Hellawell, 2018:179). For some, this was further compounded by 'managerialism' (*ibid*:167) as individuals spoke of adapting their practice to meet professional expectations of others, institutional image, or performance indicators. These findings show the complex nature of professional identity of SENCo's bound up within policy, context and personal and professional attributes.

## 2.6 Chapter summary

The rate of change in the last two decades may seem dramatic compared to the gradual change since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hodkinson, 2016) with the rights and voices of parents and their children now integral to the person-centred approach that has been adopted. Revisions of policy and guidance documents have shifted thinking from a medical model to a child-centred social model and have defined and redefined the role of the SENCO.

Long referred to as 'doers' (Edwards, 2016:82), more recent changes demonstrate a move to SENCOs who 'co-ordinate the collective doing' (ibid:82) or are considered 'whole school movers and shakers' (ibid:84) with strategic leadership roles. Literature has shown how contextual differences have affected how the role is perceived and enacted in different schools, leading to great variance in the roles and conditions in which SENCOs in England work.

Literature over the last twenty years has demonstrated attempts to understand the role of the SENCO, often through discussion of tasks undertaken. There has been some focus on the values and attributes of SENCOs through researcher interpretation of what has been shared, and consensus that identity evolves over time. However, there has been no explicit research where the participant has been told that it is their identity which is being explored. This current research sought to find out how participants experience their own (evolving) professional identities as they began their career as a SENCO.

My conceptual understanding based on extant literature has been captured in Figure 1, showing the relative lack of understanding relating to SENCOs and particularly those who are new to role.

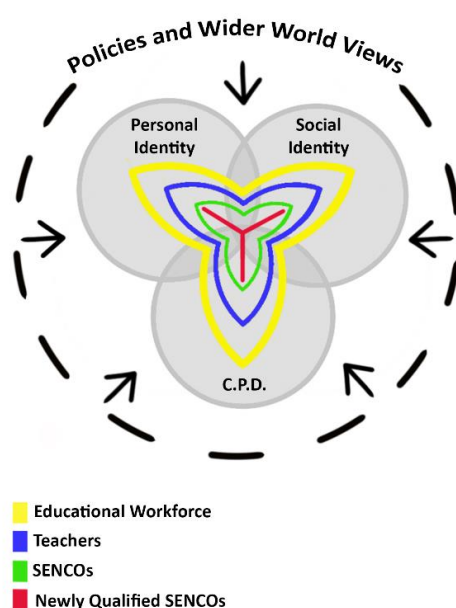


Figure 1: Conceptual understanding from literature

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1 Chapter overview

This chapter will present an explanation of the research approach, process and tools used to investigate the lived experience of how newly qualified SENCo's understand their professional identity, including how my own values and positioning affected the research design. A description of the process of data analysis and presentation of the findings will be shared. Discussion of ethical issues will show how these were considered during the early stages of the research and reviewed throughout to support the well-being of both participants and myself.

### 3.2 Introduction

A research paradigm may be defined as a 'basic set of beliefs that guide action' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:157). This study was designed to help understand how newly qualified SENCo's perceive their professional identity based on constructivism. It lent itself to a phenomenological approach, being concerned to illuminate the specific (SENCo professional identity), through an understanding of how individuals (newly qualified SENCo's) experience the phenomena. Phenomenological approaches tend to derive 'rich descriptions of concrete experiences and/or narratives of experiences' (Langdrige, 2007:5) through use of qualitative methods such as interviews, action research and analysis of personal texts.

The aim was to listen to and understand the views and opinions of those who had recently qualified and embarked upon the SENCo career path to gain a better understanding of how they experience their new professional identity and to consider whether this may impact upon SENCo recruitment and retention. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was originally designed to capture the experiential (Smith, 1996) and was therefore selected as a suitable qualitative research approach.

The research was carried out in two phases (Table 2): the pilot phase was used to trial a semi-structured interview providing opportunity to ensure questions were clear for participants to respond to, and that responses enabled the research questions to be answered. The pilot phase also allowed evaluation of recording and transcription methods. The main phase of the research involved seven participants who participated in two semi-structured interviews, about 10 months apart. Between each research activity, data analysis identified emerging themes which became the subject of further investigation in the subsequent interview.

The research considered the following key questions:

1. How do newly qualified SENCo's understand their professional identity?
2. Do newly qualified SENCo's understand their support needs and how are these met within or beyond their school?
3. How do newly qualified SENCo's link their professional identity to school, local and national policies and wider world views?

Table 2: Research timeline

Phase	Time period	Focus for research
Pilot phase	May 2016 July 2016  October 2016 Jan 2017	Recruitment of pilot phase participants Initial interviews Transcription of interviews Reflection and review of interview questions Second round of pilot interviews Transcription of interviews Reflection and review
Main phase	February 2017 March – May 2017 May – July 2017 July – September 2017 October 2017 January – June 2018 February - July 2018 March – August 2018	Recruitment of main phase participants Interview 1 Transcription of interviews Analysis, theme development by participant Preparation of interview 2 questions Interview 2 Transcription of interviews Analysis, theme development by participant
Analysis		Analysis and review of themes by and across participants

### 3.3 Research conceptual framework

The initial research idea was to try to understand what it is like to be a new SENCo in the current educational climate. It quickly became apparent that this would be a vast area for research and therefore during the early planning stages, both independent brainstorming and discussions with peers and tutors helped to refine possible lines of enquiry. This process allowed me to organise some of the main ideas that could be considered and to begin to explore literature and reflect on how my own personal and professional experiences may influence the research. As avenues were explored, they both opened further lines of enquiry and closed doors as I considered what

interested me and what my research could add to existing knowledge. Through this process, I was able to clarify the area to be researched and this helped to develop an organised enquiry and research approach. In verbalising and visualising this process, a research framework has been created (Anderson, 1998; Carroll and Swatman, 2002; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

From the beginning, I was interested in understanding the experience of others, leading to a qualitative approach. During initial discussions and literature review, the idea of professional identity in relation to SENCo's developed as an area of interest, creating a link with a phenomenological approach. This was further honed through identifying gaps in the literature in relation to how newly qualified SENCo's experience their professional identity, creating an idiographic group. While exploring the broad facets of professional identity, focusing in on one specific group of people led to use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of these professionals. The concepts are outlined in Figure 2.

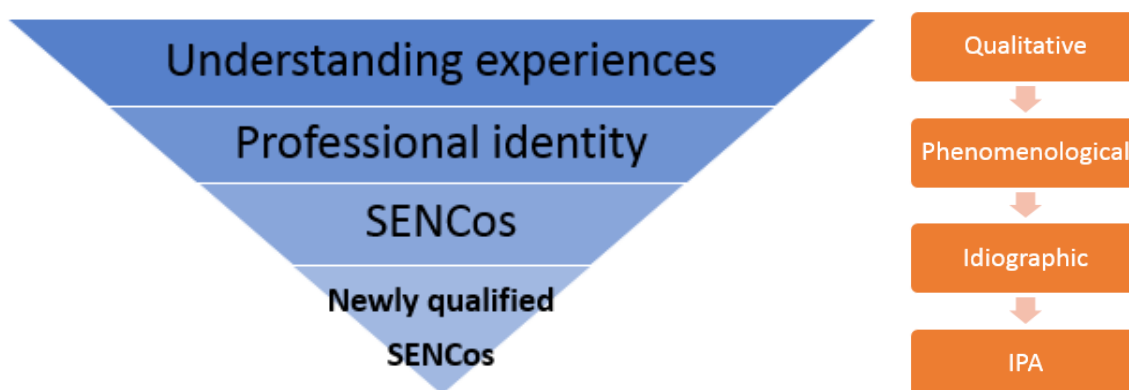


Figure 2: Methodology Conceptual Framework

### 3.4 Personal values and awareness of my own influence on the research

Through personal experiences and in professional roles in schools, a local authority and as an independent consultant, I have a long-held interest in SEN and developing approaches to support pupils with SEN. I see this as a complex and constantly evolving concept and continually learn and develop within this field. I see every child as unique and enjoy the challenge of finding ways to best support them in learning and wider life skills though working with them, their teachers, families and other agencies. This passion has not waned. And yet, through working with schools and a university, I am aware that there is a high turnover of SENCo's. As a result, I am concerned for the pupils and the staff supporting them as they lose out on the benefit of an experienced SENCo who can facilitate strategic change.

Although they volunteered, through my work as a Local Authority advisor, I knew participants recruited during the pilot phase and care was taken to ensure that they felt comfortable to speak openly. Interviews in this phase were held as, and after, I ceased working for the Local Authority; the purpose of the research was reiterated including confirming that it was for my academic interest and not on behalf of any other parties. In the main phase of the research, potential participants from a wider geographical area were approached through contact with the National Award for SEN Co-ordination (NASC) Co-ordinator for the University whose cohorts derive from across the south-east of England. I had no prior relationship with these SENCo's. Awareness of potential power relationships during recruitment, alongside procedural development was key to ensuring that no participants felt coerced to participate or to share or withhold their personal views (Engelbrecht *et al*, 2013).

The approach used promoted understanding of participants' experiences, to attend to the 'things themselves' (Crotty, 1998:78), and as such, sought to lay aside pre-conceptions or 'bracket' (Smith *et al*, 2009:64) my views and opinions. The purpose was to understand new perspectives, and not to validate my views and values which was aided through careful planning of interview questions, piloting questions and reflective discussions with peers and supervisors. It was essential to remain aware that the researcher can always influence what may be found, whether this be through design, relationships, or analysis (Vulliamy and Webb, 1992) and we should not pretend otherwise (Hammersley, 2000). Using an IPA approach, enabled me to reflect on how the participants made sense of their experiences through the double hermeneutic analysis allowing findings to emerge (Smith *et al*, 2009).

Smith and Osborn (2015) describe the relationship between the researcher and participant as 'a curious and attentive but 'naïve' listener' (p29) which portrays the way that social interaction is required but expert contributions are not. While cognisant of 'bracketing', I felt that it was also important to be aware of what I could bring to the research. For example, having a shared understanding of professional language allowed easier communication during the interviews.

Throughout the process, I have carefully reflected upon the fact that although experienced in the field of SEN, I could not consider myself the 'expert' as a newly qualified SENCo at that point in time. Therefore, both during the interviews and later when trying to understand how the participants were explaining their experiences of professional identity, this helped me to focus on their words and actions and to separate my own experiences as much as possible. To aid this, a reflective approach was maintained throughout, involving both formal and informal activities including:

- Making notes or jottings during or after interviews or while completing data analysis, including recognition of when I had been drawn into a discussion so that I could be cognisant of this in subsequent interviews.
- Ongoing supervision to discuss and reflect upon the progress of the research.
- Discussion to clarify points with participants if I was unclear about what they had said or meant.
- Immersing myself in raw data (transcripts) to get the best sense of what participants shared.

### **3.5 The Research Approach**

Denzin and Lincoln (2017) contrast historically more revered experimental scientific research where some consider that "truth" can transcend opinion and bias' (p8) with qualitative research which may be described by its contenders as an 'assault' on truth-telling. However, they postulate that 'nothing is ever certain' (p16) and that 'there are no objective observations' (p17), suggesting that rather than one objective reality, individuals offer accounts of their experiences which can be interpreted. This research set out to understand lived experiences from others' viewpoints and not to answer a question or solve a problem. The 'inductive and flexible nature of qualitative research' (Amparo, 2013:66) was therefore a useful starting point to allow participants to tell their own story in their own way.

The purpose of this study was to explore a specific idea or phenomenon (perceptions of professional identity), focused on one type of workplace (schools) and one professional role (newly qualified SENCo's). My aim was to acquire new knowledge rather than to test a hypothesis or create a new theory. Believing that the data required was contained within the perspectives of newly qualified SENCo's, and therefore requiring engagement with them, this led to my decision to carry out a phenomenological study (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998; Pring, 2000) using in-depth analysis of rich data (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). Acknowledging my own personal resources and the need to be 'as perceptive, insightful and discerning as one can be' (van Manen, 1990:20), I selected Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as an approach to understand the lived experiences of others. Central to this was the need to recognise that 'Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017, p17) and I needed to commit to explore phenomena in as much detail as possible without personal bias.

#### **3.5.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

Jonathon Smith has been largely accredited with developing IPA during the 1990's from its earlier phenomenological roots (Brocki and Weardon, 2006; Langdridge, 2007). He stated that IPA attempts



to 'mediate between the opposed positions of social cognition and discourse analysis' (Smith, 1996:264) thereby seeking to understand what an experience is like from someone-else's perspective, setting aside our own preconceived ideas (Arsenault and Anderson, 1998). Originally based in health psychology (Smith, 2004), IPA's focus on understanding how other people make sense of their lived experiences (Smith and Osborn, 2003) saw its popularity quickly grow within health studies and the social sciences (Reid *et al*, 2005). Smith *et al* (2009) describe IPA as 'psychological with a small *p*, as well as a big *P*' (p5) and welcome its growing popularity by researchers in other fields who are utilizing the approach to understand 'human predicament' (p5), such that it may be considered a form of applied psychology. Although mentioned in the context of Educational Psychology (Reid *et al*, 2005) it continues to be relatively novel within education research.

Like Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and others (Smith *et al*, 2009), Smith developed IPA to show a commitment to examining how people make sense of their life experiences. Through individuals being able to describe their experiences they are said to become 'an experience' (p2) that they can reflect on the significance of. In this way phenomena are both experienced and contextualised. This was integral to this research in which I wished to capture the experiences of those who were new to the role of SENCO as they shared their experiences of developing a new professional identity.

Hermeneutics or the theory of interpretation represents a second element of IPA. Both during and after interviews, my role was to listen closely to what was said and what I felt that the participant meant, to interpret and make meaning from them expressing their experience. At that moment in time, my own first-hand account was irrelevant, as I had been a new SENCO many years previously in a different context. Therefore, I was reliant on their eye-witness accounts of their own experiences to develop my own understanding.

Through an 'iterative and inductive cycle' (Smith *et al*, 2009:79) moving 'back and forth' (p28) from the parts to the whole and back again, I was able to gather a richer insight into the lived experience of each participant through 'interpretation-understanding' (Smith and Osborn, 2003:54). As themes began to emerge, repeating this double hermeneutic circle to explore common or disparate themes across participants allowed me to capture the experience within this idiographic group. While acknowledging that findings cannot be generalised beyond these individuals, it allowed me to focus closely on how this specific group experienced their professional development producing what may be considered truth as coherence (Bridges, 2009).

The methods used in IPA are not a prescriptive recipe, and 'there is no single, definitive method' (Smith and Osborn, 2015:25), instead offering suggestions of what has worked for them. This

allowed me to consider best advice but the flexibility to respond to the unfolding findings and needs of participants. I felt this to be important as it reflects my natural demeanour when working with others, and gave purpose to the research (Smith, 2004) through analysis using a 'dynamic process with an active role for the researcher' (Smith and Osborn, 2003:53) to identify and group units of meaning together (Creswell, 2009), allowing clusters of themes to emerge.

A key tenet of IPA is the need to use a small homogenous group of participants (Langdrige, 2007; Smith *et al*, 2009; Cohen *et al*, 2011). Given the time taken for interviews, transcription and analysis (Smith and Osborn, 2015), this supported the logistics of this study; I needed to balance my workload with the needs of busy SENCo's to enable access to the quality and depth of information that can be gained from such qualitative, phenomenological approaches (Anderson, 1998; Finlay, 1999; Smith *et al*, 2009).

### 3.5.2 Criticisms of IPA

Whilst I noted the criticisms of IPA (Willig, 2009), the key concerns regarding deficits in language and cognition were not felt to be applicable within this study which used articulate communicators. She also suggested that language may construct rather than describe reality and that it does not extend its reach to understanding why people have such experiences or why there are differences between individuals' experiences. Due to awareness of this, care was taken when constructing the interview schedule to ensure that questions were appropriately phrased to gather as much meaning as possible. Furthermore, as this research involved me interpreting their language (a double hermeneutic) there was further possibility of transmutation from the person's lived experience. The analytic approach taken, including checking back with participants, reflection and discussion with supervisors helped to maintain focus as closely as possible on what was being shared.

Eatough and Smith (2006) express the importance of IPA in understanding 'the relationship between what people think (cognition), say (account) and do (behaviour)' (*ibid*:486) and note that their perceptions will also be affected by emotions. Willig (2009) suggested that this may affect the efficacy of IPA. While recognising that not everyone is able to articulate their thoughts and feelings (Smith and Osborn, 2015), indeed, some may have reasons why they do not wish to share such information, I saw it as part of my role to interpret participants' emotional states during the in-depth analysis.

While considering the criticisms of IPA, alternative approaches such as grounded theory, ethnography and discourse analysis had been considered. However, these approaches presented other limitations to the aim of the research, such as a focus on being able to define, conclude or

theorise based on the findings; the busy and the sensitive nature of participants' work made the idea of intensive fieldwork unsuitable; and rather than analysis of the discourse itself it was more important to understand the experiences being presented. IPA was therefore chosen because it offered the opportunity to 'explore in detail the processes through which participants make sense of their experiences, by looking at the respondents account of the processes they have been through' (Brocki and Weardon, 2006:88).

### **3.6 Research Process**

Having chosen IPA to understand newly qualified SENCo's perceptions of their professional identity, I decided to carry out two semi-structured interviews which utilised open enquiry methods (Langdrige, 2007; Smith *et al*, 2009). The research was divided into two distinct phases – the pilot and main phases. The pilot phase was held between May 2016 and January 2017, with the main phase occurring from February 2017 to August 2018.

#### **3.6.1 Research participants**

Phenomenological approaches can be applied to single or multiple participants (Smith *et al*, 2009) but while a single case provides the researcher with deep analysis of one case, it is not possible to infer if this is a unique example of the phenomena. Thus, by utilising a small number (3-6) of participants (Smith and Osborn, 2003; Langdrige, 2007; Smith *et al* 2009), emergence of common themes can be identified through recurrence of phenomena.

Use of purposive sampling (Smith and Osborn, 2003; Smith *et al*, 2009) allowed the collation of views from a closely defined or homogenous group (Langdrige, 2007; Cohen *et al*, 2011) – based on participants who 'have had experiences relating to the phenomenon being researched' (Kruger, 1988:150). With the aim to create a homogenous group, recruitment criteria included completion of NASC within the previous six months, to be currently working within a school, and to have held the role of SENCo for at least one year. As many people come to the role of SENCo mid-career, and many hold more than one responsibility with variability in the 'positioning and status of the role' (Ekins, 2015: 59) it was accepted that they would bring a range of personal and professional factors to the role, and it would be highly challenging to create a fully homogenous group. The recruitment criteria allowed participants to be selected in relation to the research question as they were all newly qualified SENCos.

### 3.6.2 Pilot Phase

Initial expressions of interest for participation in the pilot phase were invited following an explanation of the research at a NASC course in April 2016 and LA SENCo forum in June 2016. Contact was then made by email with these SENCo's, who were sent a participant information sheet and consent form (Appendix 1) and initial questionnaire (Appendix 2) that was developed to gain a clear understanding of prospective participants' background experiences and some personal information. This was developed so that once the recruitment criteria had been met, if there was a large pool of respondents, further purposive sampling (Smith *et al*, 2009; Newby, 2010; Cohen *et al*, 2011) could be used to allow the participant group to be more clearly defined in terms of experience and qualifications. The aim was to create a homogenous group (Langdridge, 2007; Cohen *et al*, 2011) who would be able to provide a clear insight to the research.

Only two SENCos responded, possibly due to the timing of the request, although both met the recruitment criteria. They were invited to interview in July 2016 and prior to the meeting were sent an interview schedule (Appendix 3) outlining the questions and another information and consent form for their headteacher.

Reflection on the first pilot interview showed that it had become focused on the jobs completed by SENCos rather than on their professional identity. The second pilot interview questions were re-written, and the total number reduced to ensure that the participant could talk about how they perceive their professional identity. The benefit of trialling semi-structured interviews in a realistic setting (Kumar, 2011 and Lin, 2016) was that modification (through reflection) helped to develop questions that were more likely help to 'answer' the research questions, than those used at the outset (Anderson, 1998). Prior to the main phase first interview, the schedule was again revised.

The pilot participants were contacted directly by email in January 2017 to confirm whether they were still be prepared to be re-interviewed to pilot the second interview. These were held in January and February 2017 and again aided revision of the interview schedule.

### 3.6.3 Main phase

As the pilot phase participants were based within one Local Authority, I widened the geographical area for recruitment for the main phase of the project. This was discussed with the course leader for the NASC course at the university whose cohorts included several Local Authorities. An introductory email from the researcher was sent via the university administrator in February 2017 to the cohorts who had completed the NASC course since the last Academic Examination Board along with the participant information sheet (Appendix 1) and initial questionnaire (Appendix 2). This resulted in

three replies, one of which did not meet the recruitment criteria. A further message was sent through Blackboard (the university's online bulletin) and via email (March 2017) directly to cohorts who had completed session 11 (the final course date) within the last 5 months.

Following scrutiny of those returned, 7 people were invited to interview by email, which included information about the research for the headteacher along with a consent form. The first interview was arranged either by email or through a follow up telephone call. In all cases, the SENCo preferred this to take place on the school site, and all Headteachers consented. Once agreed, confirmation of the interview date and a copy of the main phase interview schedule (Appendix 4) was sent to the participants. At each stage of the process, consent was discussed, along with the right to withdraw participation (See ethics section).

At the end of the first interview, all participants were asked whether they would be prepared to engage with a second interview. They all affirmed their willingness to participate and were subsequently contacted in Nov/Dec 2017 to arrange a second interview date. At this point two participants had moved school but were prepared to continue their involvement.

A second individual semi-structured interview was held 9-10 months after the first using another interview schedule which was sent to participants in advance (Appendix 5). This sought to capture individual views on the emerging themes and allow for participants to express current thoughts regarding their professional identity. By meeting with participants more than once, the researcher hoped to understand if or how they perceived that their professional identity was evolving. By the time of the second interview, one participant had moved location, and another was about to retire and chose not to participate in the interview, however, both consented to continued use of their data.

### **3.7 Research tools**

#### **3.7.1 Semi-structured interviews**

To understand the perspectives of the newly qualified SENCo's, interviews were chosen as the main method of data collection, considered by Mason (2002) to be one of the most common strategies in qualitative research and providing the opportunity to collect data that is both contextual and idiographic. Kvale (1996) considers these as 'literally an inter view, an interchange of views' (p2) allowing the researcher to question the participant to provide descriptions from their own point of view (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998) something that was central to this research.

Semi-structured interviews are described as the most usual form of data collection in IPA (Langdridge, 2007 and Smith *et al*, 2009). These may be considered as purposeful discussions which aim to collect 'a rich, detailed, first-person account' of experiences (Smith *et al*, 2009:56). Thus, a semi-structured interview format was chosen to allow me to facilitate the interactions with participants and enable them to provide detailed accounts of their experiences relevant to the research (Smith and Osborn 2003, Langdridge, 2007, Smith *et al*, 2009).

Semi-structured interviews have been likened to a 'painting-by-numbers kit' (Connolly, 2016:141) suggestive of structure alongside some freedoms allowing responsiveness to a participant to follow interesting lines of inquiry (Smith and Osborn, 2003). While this can produce 'richer data' (*ibid*, p57) it is likely to be harder to analyse than a structured interview or questionnaire (Smith and Osborn, 2015). Initial thoughts of using a questionnaire to mitigate this were discounted after considering the findings of Beijaard *et al* (2000). Accepting the advice of Smith *et al* (2009) a second interview was instead used to explore concepts that had surfaced during the first interview, and to reduce the potential for distortion of memory. By using two interviews about 9-10 months apart in the current study, it was felt that participants would only be reflecting on a relatively short period of time and would therefore have more accurate recollections.

### 3.7.1 Interview schedule

IPA seeks to explore the lived experiences of others, not to test a predetermined hypothesis (Smith and Osborn, 2003), and rather than directly asking the research questions, is more normally considered through a 'sideways' approach (Smith *et al*, 2009:58). It was important that open questioning was used to allow participants' voices to be heard, rather than closed or value-laden questions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; 2017; Smith and Osborn, 2003) which would simply confirm or refute an idea or give opportunity for only simple responses. As such, interview schedules (appendices 3,4,5) were considered a helpful tool (Smith *et al*, 2009). This provided an outline of potential questions although enabled a more relaxed dialogue and diversified conversation as 'unexpected turns are often the most valuable aspects' (Smith *et al*, 2009:58). The interview schedule was seen as an indicative guide and following what is considered good practice for an IPA research approach, it was decided to provide participants with a copy of this prior to the interviews (Smith *et al*, 2009).

The questions were devised through the following process:

- Main research questions identified in the draft research proposal.
- Discussion with supervisors, further reading and review of research questions.

- Draft interview schedule written and personally reviewed to ensure clarity and openness of questions while maintaining a focus on the research questions.
- Review of the draft schedule by supervisors and updated.
- Pilot of interview schedule followed by researcher reflection.
- Interview schedule updated and shared with supervisors.

Through constructing and reviewing the interview schedule I ensured that questions focussed on what I was trying to achieve, ensured questions were clear, understandable, appropriately sequenced and enabled me to consider additional prompts that may be required (Smith and Osborn 2003). Having reflected on the pilot interviews, a decision was made to include a direct question to determine what participants understood about the term professional identity. While this is atypical of IPA, which usually utilises the research to construct the concept, as this research sought to understand how they *experience* their professional identity rather than attempting to construct a definition, it was deemed important to gain an understanding of what they perceived of the term being explored. Furthermore, through use of an interview schedule, during the interview, I was able to focus on the responses, rather than generating lines of inquiry. Through early discussion with participants, I was able to assure them that they were free to share anything that was relevant to the discussion and not feel that they had to answer set questions (Smith and Osborn, 2003). It was important to be responsive to the nuances of what participants were saying and each interview concluded with an opportunity for them to share any additional thoughts or to contact the researcher if they wished following the interview.

### **3.7.2 Interview process**

To help participants to feel at ease (Brooks *et al*, 2014), all interviews were held in quiet rooms within their school and efforts were made by the school to ensure that the interview was not interrupted, such as withholding telephone calls and placing a do not disturb sign on the door. Interviews lasted about 40 minutes as it was important not to take too much time from busy professionals, while this time frame was flexible should they wish to share further views.

As the facilitator and guide (Smith and Osborn, 2003) I ensured that I built a rapport with all participants, ensured that they were aware of the focus of each interview, and created a relaxed discussion style to allow detour from the schedule and then refocusing on the questions to allow comparisons. During the second interview, participants were given a word web and time to gather their thoughts for discussions about beliefs, values and motivations. This was so that they felt more prepared for the discussion and could use it as a prompt rather than as a discrete tool.

With participant consent (see ethics), all interviews were audio recorded to enable accurate transcription (Smith and Osborn, 2003). I trialled the use of equipment at home and then with pilot participants before the main phase interviews to ensure ease of use and clarity of sound. While this worked well, I was aware that non-verbal behaviour would not be recorded and yet could affect the analysis of what was said. To support recall of such behaviours, brief notes were made during and after each interview and if deemed significant, they were added to the transcription.

The underlying principle of IPA is to capture information shared by participants although other information to contextualise the data can be used (Smith *et al*, 2009). From the initial questionnaire (Appendix 2), I had some knowledge of participants and their settings, and occasionally other information was shared before or after interviews. Natural reflection resulted in consideration of this information and how it may link with participants' comments – as such this was embryonic analysis of emerging themes.

### **3.7.3 Transcription**

In IPA studies, the convention is to transcribe each interview verbatim leaving a wide margin on each side of the page for analytical comments (Langdrige, 2007; Smith *et al*, 2009). Smith and Osborn (2003) also suggest that significant pauses, laughs etc. should be noted. Caution about the length of time transcription takes (Smith and Osborn, 2003; Langdrige, 2007; Smith *et al*, 2009) had been noted and proved to be the case! At times the audio file had to be replayed multiple times to ensure content was accurately captured. If there was any doubt about what the participant had said due to clarity on the recording or researcher understanding, the participant was contacted to confirm what had been said or meant (Grbich, 1999).

## **3.8 Data Presentation and Analysis Methods**

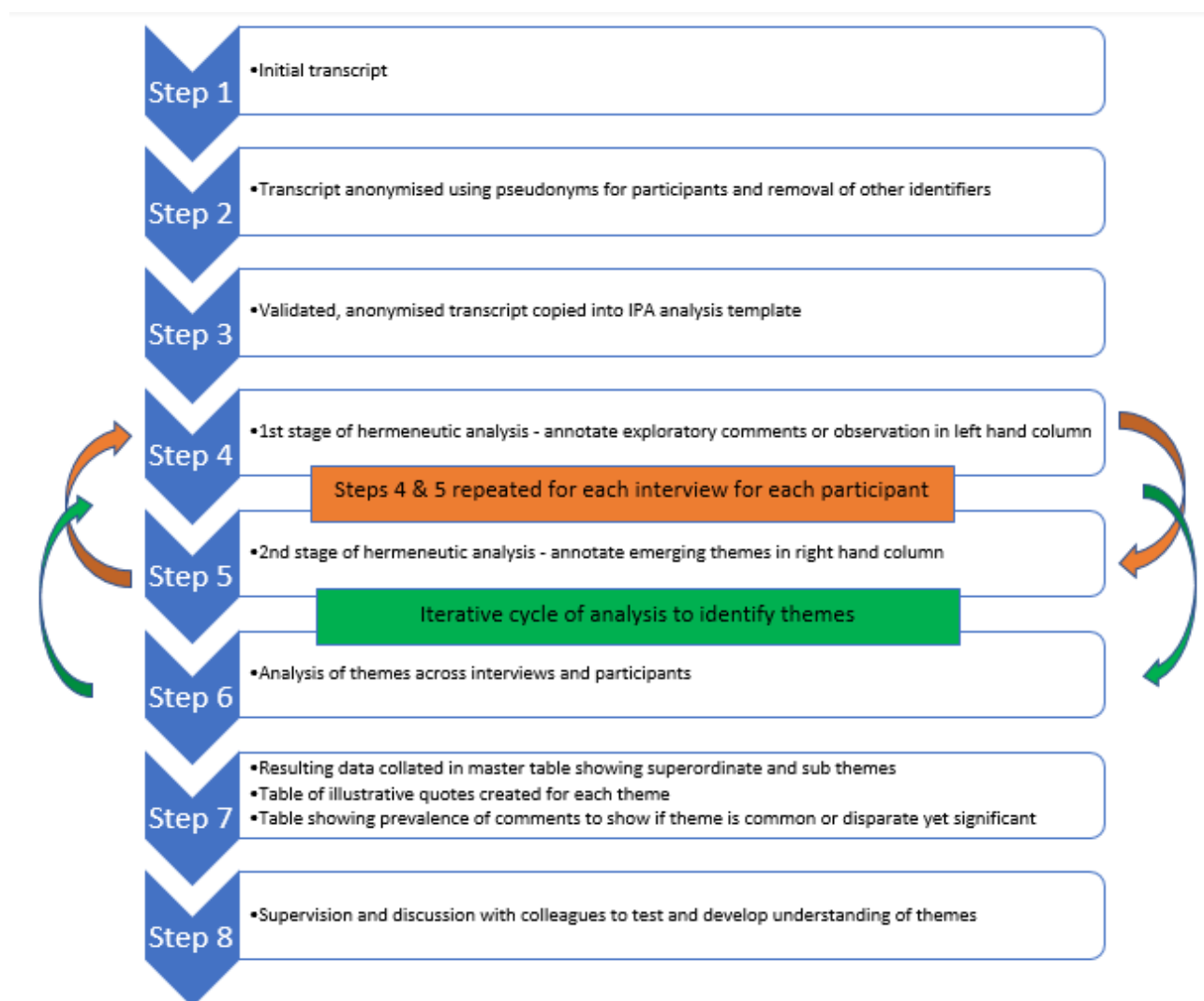
The purpose of the interviews was the desire to understand the lived experiences of newly qualified SENCOs, while remembering that the findings may, or may not, provide direct responses to the research questions. Therefore, hermeneutic inquiry was necessary to look beyond the surface for meaning that may otherwise remain hidden (Crotty, 1998). The twelve interviews generated a lot of data and following Smith and Osborn's (2003) advice I immersed myself fully in one interview before moving on to another (an idiographic approach). The analysis required me to engage with the 'messy chaos of the lived world' (Smith *et al*, 2009:55), and to proceed with 'a healthy flexibility' (p79) and open mind. It was through an 'iterative and inductive cycle' (*ibid*:79) that I engaged in an interpretative relationship with the transcript noting my thoughts as I read through the scripts



repeatedly. I was conscious of the need to try and understand the content and complexity of the meanings, rather than the frequency of them (Smith and Osborn, 2003).

Consideration of texts by prolific writers in this field (Smith and Osborn, 2003; Langdrige, 2007; Smith *et al*, 2009) and review of numerous IPA studies has shown that while IPA does not wish to tie the researcher to a single form of analysis, there are common practices which have been collated and followed in this study. The steps of analysis are outlined below (Figure 3), and further detail can be found in Appendix 6 including examples of evidence.

Figure 3 Steps of analysis



The use of software was considered for both transcription and data analysis. Review of IPA literature, wider online searches, discussions with people who are active in the field of IPA through attendance at workshops and involvement in an IPA forum, the consensus was that:

- Use of oral-to-text software with multiple voices is not very accurate.

- The personal transcription of the audio recordings allows multiple engagements with the interview and acts allows informal processing and analysis of the data. As the researcher was there, it also allows the addition of non-verbal behaviour notes.
- While software programmes may be able to identify words and phrases, personal analysis allow nuances of language to be explored and interpreted through direct involvement.

For these reasons, I transcribed all interviews, including everything audible and additional notes if significant pauses or gestures were made. This intuitive, inductive, and iterative process allowed increasing understanding of the data which is unlikely to have been achieved through software manipulation.

The use of pseudonyms for each participant enabled me to follow each of their 'stories' through the research. In performing in-depth analysis initially on each individual interview, I felt that I gained greater insight into what they were explaining. If I had not fully understood what was said having transcribed it, I spoke to or emailed that participant to clarify or validate what I had recorded.

During the initial stage of hermeneutic analysis, I re-read the first transcript several times (Smith *et al*, 2009) prior to annotating, initially on a hard copy of the document and later creating an electronic record in the same format. Each subsequent reading illuminated a new thought or observation. Having repeated this several times, I began the process of considering what 'themes' I could detect within this interview and noted this in the right-hand column of the transcript. At times, I found myself reiterating what had been written in the left-hand column and it was necessary to step away from the text and allow ideas to percolate into broader themes. Again, this process was repeated until I felt that I had exhausted the data.

Although it has been suggested that once emergent themes have been recognised on the first transcript, these can then be used to analyse the subsequent interviews (Smith and Osborn 2003), I felt that it was more appropriate to follow the same initial procedure for each transcript to avoid missing new emerging themes. That said, while I made every attempt to bracket pre-conceptions, as more transcripts were analysed, I was conscious of 'recognising' familiar themes.

The twelve interviews generated huge quantities of data and while initially I tried to link the emerging themes (and their evidence) in my head or on paper, it quickly became overwhelming. To counter this, I used an old-fashioned 'cut and stick' method of chopping up annotated transcripts and arranging them on large pieces of paper according to theme. The physical process allowed me to review my thinking, evolving the themes as I moved paper around. Following some initial discussion of these findings with my supervisors and other IPA colleagues, I was able to create a master table

showing the superordinate and sub-ordinate themes along with illustrative quotes (Smith *et al*, 2009) so that the reader can see links between the data and the analysis. The inclusion of a theme has been considered based on the richness of the data, not on the prevalence (Smith and Osborn, 2003) although in Table 5 (Chapter 5) the participants who contributed to each theme have been noted to show whether it was derived through commonality or a discrete, yet significant comment.

### 3.9 Validity, Reliability, Generisability and Limitations

#### 3.9.1 Validity

While principles and checklists of validity have been developed, the theoretical frameworks that underpin interpretative approaches and IPA specifically, focus on understanding specific phenomena in particular contexts and therefore it can be challenging to confirm validity (Langdrige, 2007). Smith *et al* (2009) promote Yardley's (2000) four principles as a suitable approach to consider the validity of IPA. Subsequent revisions (Yardley, 2008; 2015; 2017) have remained true to the four principles which are intended to be 'extremely flexible' (Yardley, 2016:296). The way in which I addressed these principles is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Considerations and methods to promote validity in this study

<b>Yardley's principles (2000; 2008; 2015; 2017)</b>	<b>Considerations in this research</b>	<b>Methods used to support the principle</b>
1. Sensitivity to context.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The researcher-participant relationship.</li> <li>• Acceptance that participants may struggle to express what they are thinking or feeling (Brocki and Weardon 2006) or may not wish to discuss all elements of the topic (Smith and Osborn, 2003).</li> <li>• SENCos are busy people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruitment was through expressions of interest and voluntary informed consent was obtained (see ethics, 3.10).</li> <li>• Tried to ensure participants felt comfortable about the discussions and reasons for this study, and understood I was not seeking a right response, just their lived experience.</li> <li>• Used timeframes to suit SENCos.</li> </ul>
2. Commitment and rigour which may be considered the 'attentiveness' shown to participants and the 'thoroughness' of the study (Smith <i>et al</i> , 2009:181).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selection of appropriate participants.</li> <li>• Need to maintain focus and consistency.</li> <li>• Need to allow time for participant to share experience in detail.</li> <li>• Time for thorough data analysis to ensure best possible understanding.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purposive sampling was used.</li> <li>• Use of interview schedule (modified through pilot phase).</li> <li>• Assurance that I would not take up too much of their time, but they would also not be rushed.</li> <li>• Significant time devoted to transcribing interviews and re-reading the transcripts to ensure careful analysis.</li> </ul>

3. Transparency and coherence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to ensure research fits with chosen methodological approach.</li> <li>• Ensure participants and readers understand the purpose and process for the research.</li> <li>• Ensure findings are logically and clearly presented</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case presented for use of IPA due to the phenomenological and idiographic nature of the research question (3.5)</li> <li>• Participant information sheets (appendix 1) provided explicit information regarding the purpose and what was involved.</li> <li>• Clear research process and data analysis given (3.6-3.8)</li> <li>• Finding presented in two chapters to show individual experiences and themes across participants.</li> </ul>
4. Something interesting, important or useful is produced.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The research must contribute something new.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very limited extant literature on how newly qualified SENCOs experience their professional identity.</li> <li>• Use of IPA in educational research is still relatively novel and therefore study will add to that body of knowledge.</li> </ul>

### 3.9.2 Reliability

Reliability ensures that research approaches are consistent across different studies by all researchers (Cresswell, 2009). In this study, I have clearly set out and maintained an IPA approach throughout the research. As data interpretation is a subjective act, for me to demonstrate reliability, it was important to ensure that the findings (chapters 4 and 5) were clearly evidenced from the raw data (Smith *et al*, 2009). This has been further strengthened through reflexive approaches used throughout the research.

### 3.9.3 Generisability and limitations

In order not to be overwhelmed by huge quantities of rich data and in keeping with the nature of IPA, a small homogenous group was used. Close scrutiny of individual data sets (interviews) may be considered an idiographic mode of inquiry (Smith and Osborn, 2003) however, a limitation is that it does not allow wider generalisation beyond that group of participants in their contexts at that time, although Smith and Osborn (2003) propose that broadly nomothetic statements can be made to form the basis of further study. Yardley (2015) suggests that qualitative researchers 'would hope that the insights they derived from studying one context would prove useful in other contexts that had similarities' (p260). In this way, although every description of professional identity and its development is unique to the participant and influenced by their setting, conclusions derived from this analysis may be useful to SENCOs, school leaders and wider policy makers across the profession.

### 3.10 Ethics

From inception, through planning, conducting and reporting the research, I was constantly aware of ethical issues. It was important to me to have ethical responsibility underpinned by a principle of respect (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012) to 'protect [my] research participants; develop a trust with them; promote the integrity of the research; [and] guard against misconduct and impropriety.' (Cresswell, 2009:87).

I was guided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2011; 2018) which sets out its guiding framework under the following headings:

- 'responsibilities to participants
- responsibilities to sponsors, clients and stakeholders in research
- responsibilities to the community of educational researchers
- responsibilities for publication and dissemination
- responsibilities for researchers' wellbeing and development.' (BERA, 2018:5)

The current study underwent ethical consideration (Appendix 7) and received ethical approval from the university's Education Faculty Research Ethics Review. Having gained ethical approval, further considerations of ethical issues were made, discussed and reflected upon with my research supervisors (Appendix 8) and were regularly reconsidered. Within this study, the main considerations related to informed consent, the right to withdraw, anonymity, the minimisation of any stress or harm and handling of data.

It was important that participants were volunteers who had not felt pressurised to participate nor expected any reward or additional support in return for their involvement (Anderson, 1998). At the outset of the research, I was employed by a local authority and therefore mindful of potential power relationships that may exist. However, by the time of recruiting participants for the main phase of this study, I was working independently and chose to approach potential participants via their NASC tutors and administrators as I had no direct contact with these groups. All potential participants were provided with a participant information sheet (Appendix 1) outlining the purpose of the research and what would be involved. Similar information was shared with their headteacher to ensure that the participant was supported to participate, and signed consent was obtained from both. For participants who had worked with me previously, we had a further discussion about the fact that I would use only information that they shared with me during the research process as data. The fact that they had volunteered their involvement and had not been directly approached gave me confidence that they did not feel coerced into participating.

Although voluntary informed consent was given at the start of the research, this was orally repeated prior to each interview, along with their right to withdraw completely or to ask for certain information not to be used (Langdridge, 2007; Smith *et al*, 2009). This was important to me, as although voluntary informed consent was given at the outset, they could not know how discussions would evolve. During the research process, one person had relocated, and another had retired; although unable to participate in the second interview, both consented to their previous data being included. No participants asked for any data to be withheld.

When using IPA, it is not possible to promise confidentiality, as there is an intention to use the data that is collected, however this is countered by the assertion that anonymity can be provided (Smith *et al*, 2009). Confidentiality was addressed through the storage of data in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998, 2018) and General Data Protection Regulations (2018): initial participant information sheets (Appendix 1), audio-recordings of interviews and subsequent transcripts, were all stored on a password protected computer to which only I had access. Any handwritten notes were stored in a locked filing cabinet. I undertook all transcriptions so that no original data or identifiers were seen by anyone else, and participants could request a copy of the transcript at any time to review and assure themselves of anonymity. I gave all participants pseudonyms and all other identifiers, such as school name or names of other professionals were removed. All data will be destroyed five years after the completion of this research and any data used in subsequent publications or presentations will be fully anonymised. This process was important to me as it supported the integrity of the research and enabled participants to have confidence to share their experiences.

There was no ethical issue relating to openness or deception by the researcher, as IPA aims to explore participants' experiences. To facilitate this, they were provided with an interview schedule, setting out areas for discussion and informed that all interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed to preserve the accuracy of the discussion and no other information would be included as data within the research (Langdridge, 2007; Smith *et al*, 2009). This also reduced any ambiguity about what constituted data as only recorded information formed part of the data set. Furthermore, the need for openness was twofold as the research relied on participants openness with me so that I could understand their lived experience.

The whole study, and in particular the interviews, were designed and conducted to minimise stress and harm to participants. To enable this and to maintain focus on the research, the interview schedule indicated what we would be discussing, and participants could opt not to discuss anything they felt uncomfortable with. Pilot interviews, reflexion and discussion with my supervisors helped

hone the questions and develop my confidence in managing the interviews including the use of audio recordings which had been consented to. Due to awareness that discussions could cause participants to share views or feelings not normally discussed with colleagues, careful consideration was given to the process that would be followed should a participant make a disclosure or seem upset during an interview (Appendix 9); this had been discussed with my research supervisor and included details of when an interview would be ceased and how a participant, or indeed myself, could be signposted or seek support. During this research, fortunately, this did not present itself, but I felt more confident conducting the interviews having given this significant consideration.

Throughout the research process, it was made clear to participants that they, not I, were the experts in this study and time was taken to ensure a rapport developed so that interviews were relaxed. Interviews were held at times and in locations to minimise disruption to the participants, and while interviews were planned to last about 40 minutes, if they wished to explore an area in greater detail, they had time to do so. During interactions with participants, I assured them that they possessed the 'expert' knowledge that I was seeking to understand and therefore there was no sense of judgement. Through developing a respectful relationship with participants, and as I had no professional involvement with them or their settings, the risk of participants providing desirable responses (Denzin, 1989) was also reduced as they felt confident to report their own experiences.

### **3.11 Chapter summary**

In trying to understand newly qualified SENCOs lived experiences, IPA provided both a theoretical framework and a research approach. This research will contribute to a growing body of educational research through using IPA which is currently novel in this field. Use of two semi-structured interviews gave a sense of how the participants' lived experience changed over time, while an iterative, hermeneutic circle enabled me to delve into the rich data to seek meaning of the lived experiences and consider themes that emerged.

In the next chapter, the experience of each participant is presented in turn, using verbatim evidence to consider how they experience their professional identity. This is followed in Chapter 5 by a presentation of findings to consider the common and disparate themes that emerged across the participants.

## Chapter 4: The lived experience of newly qualified SENCos

### 4.1 Chapter overview

This chapter presents the lived experiences of the newly qualified SENCos through descriptive and interpretative accounts, demonstrating that although they all exist within a homogenous group defined by their length of service in a particular role, they each experience this differently due to contextual and personal influences. Having carried out 12 interviews, each lasting about an hour, transcripts provided huge amounts of data. It has therefore been necessary to be highly selective in choosing quotations to use within this section; in no way does this suggest that I valued the other comments any less. The 'interweaving of analytic commentary and raw extracts' demonstrates the dialogic nature of IPA (Smith *et al*, 2009:110).

### 4.2 Introduction

In presenting the data collected from interviews, it is necessary to acknowledge that all understanding is interpretative and may be considered a 'joint product of researcher and researched' (Smith *et al*, 2009:110). As with other aspects of IPA, rather than a strict script to follow during the write-up, Smith *et al* (2009) present different options and recommend that the researcher considers what is most appropriate for their own study. In contrast to some methods, they emphasise the importance of the 'I' (interpretative) in IPA when they begin their discussion of the write up using the heading 'Analysis or results section' (p108). While the raw transcripts are the source of data, my reading of them automatically began the process of interpretation and making sense of how the participant experiences their role of newly qualified SENCo.

The first stage of meaning-making was through immersion in the data: interviewing, transcribing and making exploratory comments before beginning to identify emerging themes (see chapter 3.8 and Appendix 6 for example analysed interviews). This was followed by deeper scrutiny of individual participants accounts (Smith, 2011). The purpose of this was to highlight the 'gems' or 'small utterances' (p6) that caught my attention in the data, and through the iterative process of analysis were deemed important to that individual.

Within the presentation of lived experiences I have identified each quotation using the initial of the participant, followed by a number to indicate if this was the first or second interview. This is followed by the page and then line numbers. For example: C2:20:4 is Claire's second interview, page 20, line 4. Omission of some text is represented by [...], while ellipses alone indicate a pause by the participant.



Table 4 provides a summary of contextual information for each participant which was obtained from their initial questionnaires.

Table 4: Summary of participants' contextual information

	Participants						
	Claire	David	Emma	Fiona	Grace	Holly	Isabel
Date began teaching	1991	1993	1999	1997	2001	1985	2004
Years teaching experience	15	23	18	20	15	32	12
Current setting	Small, Independent, Primary	Large, Mainstream, Secondary	Large, Catholic Mainstream Primary	Small, Methodist Mainstream, Primary	Average, Mainstream, Primary	Large, Mainstream, Secondary	Large, Mainstream, Secondary
Job title	SENCo	Head of SEN	SENCo	Deputy Head teacher, Inclusion Manager, SENCo	Deputy Headteacher	Assistant Headteacher, SENCo	Assistant SENCo
Length of service in role	Under 1 year	2-5 years	1-2 years	2-5 years	2-5 years	2-5 years	2-5 years
Amount of SENCo time	3/3 days	4/5 days	3/3 days	5/5 as needed within role	5/5 Non-teaching DH/ SENCo	4/5 days	2/5 days
Other responsibilities	EAL, Gifted and Talented	Teaching	None	RE & Collective worship, strategic lead for young carers, designated safeguarding lead for Looked After Children, NQT Induction tutor, the list goes on!	SENCo, Teaching and Learning	Teaching (1 day/wk), All student welfare, inclusion and safeguarding	Class teacher
Summary reason for becoming a SENCo.	Own children had/ have SEN	Progression from being specialist teacher.	Own children have SEN and was interested in supporting children and their parents.	Was asked when previous SENCo retired. Headteacher wanted someone in post with experience and understanding of a whole school strategic approach.	As non-teaching Deputy was asked to cover SENCo maternity leave. After 1 year, she decided to not return so the role was made permanent.	When job-sharing SENCos left Headteacher asked her to take on role having line- managed them. Did not want to but knew the team does a good job.	Interested to expand knowledge and expertise of child development and school management.

### 4.3 Claire's experience

Claire was interviewed on 7<sup>th</sup> February 2017 and 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018

Both interviews illuminated how relationships with staff, parents and outside agencies were affecting Claire's perceptions of the role and of herself. She felt these were being determined by "what has gone before" [C1:1:12] and that she was "expected to do x, y and z" [C2:3:1-2]. Claire recognised some conflict between her own expectation and understanding of the role and those of her colleagues and parents, considering that in part this was due to the type of setting she worked in. Claire was not judgmental about this disparity, merely recognising that it existed. However, she did express concern that "there's a lot of paperwork that can crowd out time with the children, so it's not quite as hands on as you might like." [C1:7:16-8:2] and that staff often considered her to be:

*"a fixer of problems... If there's a square peg in a round hole, they will send that peg to me. Wave your magic wand kind of thing."* [C1:4:1-10]

Pauses and hesitations indicated that Claire did not want to be disloyal to her colleagues but indicated that their perceptions, along with not being part of the leadership team, were affecting her

professional identity. This included not getting *“any say in how TAs are allocated, how my time is used”* [C1:8:6].

Claire shared that a clear professional identity is important to ensure that *“parents and other professionals recognise what the SENCo's role is.”* [C2:14:4-5]. In some cases, Claire has found parental understanding *“prejudices whether they are going to talk to me or not.”* [C1:1:12-14] as *“in this type of setting... they don't want their children to have special needs.”* [C1:4:14-5:2]. In her setting, Claire does not encounter many external professionals, and although she feels that most understand her role, she noted that:

*“There's a few that ...seemed to think that I have all the time to devote to just that one child.”* [C2:11:16 – 12:2]

Both interviews highlighted Claire's feelings of isolation both within her setting and from outside support. She noted that *“the buck stops with me”* [C1:6:5-6] and that *“left to your own devices ...it's a bit scary.”* [C2:11:2-3], showing the persistence of this experience almost a year after the first interview. Mitigating this feeling to some extent, Claire explained during the second interview, that the school had a new headteacher who:

*“takes an interest in what I am doing, asks me my opinion on things and he listens to what I am saying, so that is quite different.”* [C2:9:13-10:4]

When considering which of her own personal attributes aid her in the role of SENCo, Claire focused on her emotional intelligence, demeanour and faith including words such as: *Patient, listens, tenacious, cares, energy*. Claire also stated that to take on the role, you need to *“have an interest in SEN”* [C1:7:10].

When talking about anything to do with motivation, values, beliefs, or what underpins Claire's demeanour and the way that she acts, Claire always returned to one fact:

*“That's probably at the base of it [pointing to faith on the word web] and everything else comes out of that.”* [C2:3:11-12]

She spoke of the holistic rights of children and their parents, returning to her approach being related to *“the way that I see people is based on my faith.”* [C2:5:5]. Claire often spoke of how her faith underpins who she is and how she responds to others and yet she felt it necessary to seek affirmation that she could state this.

In addition to faith, knowledge attained through experience, both as a teacher and as a mother of children with SEN, and training, were considered important to Claire. At times, this was expressed positively such as during the second interview when Claire displayed greater confidence due to *“more experience of dealing with things that I find harder, backed up by training and then...knowing that I was right”* [C2:8:13-9:1-6]. In contrast, a lack of knowledge or experience was discussed in

terms of Claire feeling unable to *“make the call on certain decisions”* [C1:6:11] leaving her feeling vulnerable. Claire shared that while she had not received any induction in her current setting, in her previous setting, she had been *“working with the SENCo, so I could watch and learn... that was good training.”* [C2:10:13-16]. Since completing NASC, Claire had felt that she needed additional training, but had undertaken very little, and what she had attended had been sought by herself, not as part of her professional development or line management. Claire was slightly hesitant about the impact of training that she had attended, and yet affirmed her desire to *“increase my knowledge”* [C2:3:8] in order *“to keep up to date with the job”* [C1:6:15] and *“because I don't meet regularly with other people I am in danger of being isolated”* [C1:7:4-5].

When discussing whether any school, local or national policies and guidance have provided her with clarity around her SENCo professional identity, Claire was a little vague, noting that there is national guidance, and the school has an SEN policy but not relating this to any impact on herself. She was not aware if there is any guidance specifically for independent schools.

Claire suggested that a generic description of SENCo professional identity, such as the experience and training necessary, and the main focus of the role would be useful however she also noted that:

*“we are all different people, so we are coming at it with different baggage, different strengths, different weaknesses... I think you need a generic one, but then the school can adapt it.”* [C2:7:8-14]

She clarified that she meant what she did may change if she moved setting, *“but the identity of the SENCo, that would be the same.”* [C2:8:9-10] suggesting that Claire considers this to be based more on innate or learned traits. Claire does not consider that professional identity impacts on the recruitment or retention of SENCos citing other factors such as the type of setting or the expectations of parents and staff as having a greater impact.

### **4.3 David's experience**

Having interviewed David on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2017, he was subsequently promoted to Head of Inclusion and SENCo at another large mainstream secondary school in a different area. We had a brief telephone conversation, in which he reaffirmed consent for the inclusion of his data, but it was impractical to conduct the second interview.

Throughout David's interview it was clear he works hard to build positive and effective relationships with students, parents and colleagues. While he stated that he *“would hope that the majority of them would see me as someone who will try and help them”* [D1:12:5-11], he recognises that others see him *“as the person who is in charge of the kids who aren't so great at school.”* [D1:15:13-14].

David noted the importance of the SEN governor (and wider governing body) and the LA SEN outreach team in supporting him in the role. He spoke about the SEN governor being *“really approachable”* [D1:9:1-3] and an advocate for SEN who *“fights our corner”* [D1:9:8]. David has developed a mutually respectful relationship with the LA SEN outreach team, and said, *“I hope that they would see me as an equal”* [D1:13:4-8] in working together to support the students.

David expressed that his identity is affected by the understanding of others and as such he would describe himself as *“a teacher, followed by a SEN teacher or head of SEN.”* [D1:4:8-10] or as *“specialising in SEN”* [D1:1:6] depending on who he is speaking with. He felt that he has developed good relationships with parents that he has worked with, but noted that there can be more challenging interactions when parents consider that:

*“you haven’t done enough for my child and they are struggling to make progress because we are not doing enough,”* [D1:10:4-11]

Similarly, David feels that class teachers and the leadership team have different expectations of him from *“knowing everything there is to know about SEN”* [D1:4:15-16] to those who have said that they do not understand his role. While new to the role, David has been able to build on other prior experience and has confidence to say when he does not have the answer and needs to seek further advice [D1:5:1-3].

David spoke at some length about his own misperceptions of the role and the requirement to react to new guidance or educational changes which showed the effect this was having on him. He particularly noted the increased focus on data and the need demonstrate the impact of support to a range of stakeholders. He recognised that he had developed this skill and knows where to seek support within the school if needed.

David expressed gratitude to a range of people inside and outside school who share responsibility for SEN, including a previous SENCo mentor, an experienced SEN colleague, the SEN school team, LA outreach team and staff with other experiences to compliment his own. However, he also shared examples of staff who were reluctant to accept their responsibilities for students with SEN who will ask him *“what are you going to do about it.”* [D1:8:7-13] when they have been queried about progress. He voiced some frustration that he related to national and local policies which promote quality first teaching and shared responsibility. Similarly, David experiences a sense of shared responsibility from the LA outreach team but noted that other agencies can seem more directive and even used the powerful verb, ‘dictate’. Throughout the interview it was clear that David prefers a collegiate approach to supporting students rather than a hierarchy within the services.

At different points in the discussion, David found it hard to define his professional identity. He said:

*"Having the SENCo role, you can be an intermediary, it's not one identity, it's more fractured."* [D1:2:3-4].

He stated that he holds the roles of SENCo and teacher within his setting but is often called upon to work in several other areas, including middle management. Despite this, he felt that there are several other local secondary school colleagues he meets with who share the same experiences and identities that he does, and he noted that it is:

*"good to catch up with them because it is just you and you realise, you're not just the only one with that identity and for them, the problems are the same."* [D1:2:13-3:3]

When considering his attributes that support him as a SENCo, David referred to himself as:

*"specialising in SEN ...and also line managing a large team of staff and teachers."* [D1:1:6-9]

He made other comments about being part of the middle management team, being a Head of Faculty and shared examples of his strategic and leadership skills. David explained how these skills enabled him to be part of decision-making and lead others while also expressing that at times he was glad not to be on the senior leadership team who had to make final decisions in some challenging circumstances.

During the interaction with David, he presented as a thoughtful person, who seems to be level-headed and calm by nature. He shared that he is not easily frustrated and is able to work pragmatically, basing decisions or opinions on facts that he has gathered and understanding the emotions in a room to negotiate a way towards a child-centred solution. David feels that these characteristics help him negotiate the challenges that can be faced working in a very large setting. He demonstrated how he has been flexible, and able to handle conflict whether that be emotional, academic or financial. Constantly, David referred to maintaining his focus on the students and his long-held passion for teaching children with SEN: *"It's about the child."* [D1:8:9-12] and *"looking at what's best overall for these students"* [D1:13:8-9]. He shared that it is interest and enjoyment in the role that sustains him, however this was offset by him saying that if someone was to speak to him about becoming a SENCo:

*"I wouldn't put people off...[but] I would tell them the realities of it."* [D1:18:12-19:1]

David also noted that success in the role may be affected by the setting, sharing that a colleague is now an assistant SENCo in a primary school, but he did not think that they would have coped with the same role in a large secondary school.

Throughout the interview, David recognised that the wealth of experience he has developed through working in different schools, in England and New Zealand, as well as having taught as a specialist teacher, support him as a SENCo. He shared how he had benefited from shadowing his predecessor and similarly was supporting colleagues who have shown an interest in the role, demonstrating how

he values this form of experience. He also recognised how NASC had provided new knowledge, had helped him develop a support network and that he *“felt empowered by that course to actually think”* [D1:6:15].

Far from feeling that he has completed his training, David identified the need for this as an ongoing process noting that his responsibilities *“are now drastically different to how they were even three years ago”* [D1:5:8-9]. David had thought carefully about the questions prior to the interview, and he had identified two main areas for further development: his leadership skills (as he feels that he can be too democratic), and his data-handling skills (due to the enhanced focus on this). While he had recognised these needs, David had not identified specific training and said that this was something that he would need to research.

David shared several examples of how policy and guidance have impacted on his professional identity, including guidance from the local authority about practice in relation to EHCPs, OFSTED or the school's own development plan. He noted that it is not just changes in SEN but also *“wider educational stuff [...] will have an impact on our kids [...] we have to adapt to that”* [D1:16:11-15]. He also explained how the culture of demonstrating impact across all services affects how he is perceived and his role. David presented these thoughts as a statement of fact, not a complaint but an indication of how the role has evolved in a short period of time.

#### 4.5 Emma's experience

Emma was interviewed on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2017 and 8<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

During both interviews, Emma expressed how trusting and supportive relationships impacted on her and the development of her professional identity. The headteacher is Emma's line manager and she identified that the *“open-door policy”* [E2:7:11], trusting her judgement and allowing a bit of *“free reign”* [E2:7:14] have all helped to build her confidence. By the second interview, Emma had determined that having a strong professional identity was very important, adding that:

*“if you didn't get that back-up from the Headteacher it would make it a lot harder.”*  
[E2:12:4-5]

Emma spoke positively about the supportive relationships that she has developed with external agencies to enable her to support both teachers and students. Emma recognises that there is some variation in her colleagues' understanding of what she does and their expectations of her. She expressed some frustration that some teachers do not take full responsibility for the pupils with SEN and some even think that *“the SENCo has a magic wand.”* [E2:6:3]. This emphasised that she perceived the teachers views to be unrealistic while phrases such as 'keep on top of' and 'jump the

gun' [E2:7:2] highlight her frustration at teachers' attitudes, resulting in her role being more reactionary than she would like.

Emma considers that teachers' lack of understanding for the role of the SENCo may impact on recruitment and retention [E1:14:13-15:6] but suggests that this may be improved through teacher training [E2:15:10-14]. In contrast, she feels that children and parents have developed a better understanding through talking to them [E1:9:1-3; E1:11:2-4; E1:11:13-15] in class or during SEN parent meetings. Emma suggested that some difficulties with identity may stem from contextual differences or terms used across schools [E1:11:6] while further tension can be caused by different expectations from staff or parents [E2:10:5-10]. Emma explained that the role is a little different to how she thought it would be, although said this was *"not in a bad way for me because my knowledge of SEN has really improved and it's really interesting."* [E1:8:12-14].

While expressing good relationships within and beyond the school, during the first interview, Emma made several remarks about the role being *"an isolated job"* [E1:6:15] and feeling a bit *"out on a limb"* [E1:7:8; E1:7:13]. This feeling was less noticeable during the second interview, when Emma spoke of how she had worked to create more links beyond school.

As Emma works part-time, she stated that a focus of her role was to support teachers to support children with SEN, describing herself as a *"facilitator...so that the child can get the provision that they need in an inclusive environment."* [E1:2:5-11]. Emma also works within a wider team and was very clear about her remit and how this fits with the pastoral manager, pupil premium manager and EAL coordinator [E1:11:6-11] so that responsibility is shared across the team appropriately [E2:10:13-16]. While Emma shared concern that some teachers *"still don't always take the responsibility for being the SEN teacher."* [E2:6:4-5], she did add that through weekly classroom visits *"working with the teacher and... giving them ideas about what they could do"* [E2:6:6-9], this has been improving. Emma feels that this has been further aided by SLT who have helped to share responsibility through training for all staff and changing how TA time is used [E2:7:14-8:1].

During both interviews, Emma was animated and enthusiastic about opportunities to attend formal and informal networks with people who share her focus on SEN. As a result, she feels well connected in the local area and can seek or provide support [E1:7:2-5; E2:11:2-6]. However, she also noted that the specific demographics of her school [E2:5:1-5], and the range of roles encompassed by the term SENCo in different settings [E1:11:11] may also impact her identity.

Considering the attributes and skills that support her in the role of SENCo, Emma explained how she was able to draw on previous experience as part of the senior leadership team, although now



identifies as *“middle leadership...And I’m a line manager for my TA’s.”* [E1:1:14-2:1]. While no longer part of SLT, Emma noted that she still attends most SLT meetings and recognises the shift to a more strategic role as SENCO with responsibilities having changed to liaising, supporting, training and managing resources, rather than operational duties [E1:2:7-9; E2:6:5-8; E2:7:14-8:1; E1:12:9-13; E2:11:14-12:2].

The change in role has not been without challenges for Emma particularly regarding how it has affected her relationships with some staff as she has had to manage a shift between collegiate friendships to managerial interactions although she seems to have grasped these, driven by her focus on positive outcomes for the children [E1:5:7-6:2].

This has no doubt been aided by her emotional intelligence which Emma highlighted to be enhanced due to her own personal experience [E1:3:12-16; E1:3:14-4:2]. She also noted the importance of being *“self-critical”* [E2:3:4] and taking time to think, recognising that this can have both a positive and negative impact on her emotions; Emma indicated that she can access support for this from the pastoral manager or headteacher as needed [E2:10:13-16].

Both interviews highlighted the importance of good communication skills for Emma in terms of being a strategic leader and building effective relationships with colleagues and parents. Emma identified two of her attributes as being a good listener and good communicator. She explained the need to be *“confident if you’re having a difficult conversation [...] you’ve got to be persuasive”* [E1:9:15-10:2]. She also explained the need to be accessible, make timely follow up contact, be able to mediate between parents and staff or other agencies and the confidence to be direct when needed [E1:4:5-13; E1:9:16]. Emma gave examples of how she has proactively developed relationships with external agencies such as introducing herself to a new speech and language therapist so that *“they’re more open to you if you have a query”* [E1:6:10-13].

Throughout both interviews, Emma demonstrated confidence in her own abilities and in approaching others for advice or support [E1:7:8-11; E1:10:6-10]. She also shared how she is flexible, practical, organised, self-critical, reflective on practice, and able to work to a deadline. Her enthusiasm was constantly evident, and she explained that she finds the role:

*“very varied. It’s never the same year on year. It does have its challenges sometimes, but I really enjoy it and I’m learning more about different areas that I wanted to know about. There is always more to learn.”* [E2:16:1-5].

Emma linked beliefs with ‘Inclusion’ and throughout the interviews presented a child-centred holistic approach to the role. Interestingly, in the first interview, she focused on her responsibilities as SENCO [E1:11:6-9] while in the second, she demonstrated a greater awareness of the overlap of



different needs and the necessity to support and 'unpick' these [E2:4:6-5:5]. Her motives and values were also primarily related to inclusion through supporting teachers to enable pupils to make progress and feel successful and enabling parents to feel heard.

Emma explained how her previous experiences had helped her to develop her current professional identity, including 17 years of teaching experience with children [E1:1:6-8; E2: 15:1-3], whole school responsibility as literacy co-ordinator, and wider experiences such as the NASC course and working with other agencies [E1:2:16-3:7; E2:5:11-13].

In her personal life, Emma attributes some of her experience to supporting her adopted daughters who have additional needs, where she "*experienced the system*" [E2:4:2-3] which she considers also "*made me more interested in the first place into becoming the SENCo*" [E1:3:15-16].

Emma felt fortunate to have experienced a good induction into the role through training and working with her predecessor [E2:8:4-15]. She explained that she has subsequently benefited from formal training courses, which tend to be one day courses run by the local outreach team and training provided through her support networks. Emma seemed to access more opportunities through the second form of training as she highlighted these in more detail [E1:6:5-13; E2:11:2-5]. She identified that one area that was lacking was how to make use of existing resources, something that she has subsequently sought support for [E2:11:14-16].

Emma is aware of budget constraints but expressed a thirst for further knowledge and development. She had identified areas where she would like to pursue further training on specific SEN needs or in how to support teachers further [E1:8:4-5; E2:16:5-8; E1:12:8-14] to ultimately make better use of resources.

Emma shared that the reality of the role is largely as she expected and while "*There is a lot of paperwork involved, [...] I do make sure that I have time to go and observe children and to help teachers because I don't just want to be a slave to paperwork.*" and she has found that her "*knowledge of SEN has really improved and it's really interesting.*" [E1:8:9-14].

When asked whether she feels that her professional identity has been affected by any policies or guidance, Emma identified both national policies and local authority guidance [E2:12:8-9]. While noting that there used to be a lot of local variation in administrative practice, she added that the LA had recently introduced one system to be used by all schools and she felt this "*may be better because everyone is doing it in the same way ... I think it strengthens it [professional identity]*" [E2:13:2-7].

Emma also shared that the way in which policy information is shared or accessible by others can impact upon her professional identity and how she is perceived. To support this, she explained that she was trying to *“improve our website so we’ve got SEN on there and all different information about what we do”* [E2:13:14-16].

#### 4.6 Fiona's experience

Fiona was interviewed on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2017 and 8<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

By the time of the second interview, Fiona had been appointed as Headteacher at a small village primary school. Despite the change in role, Fiona wished to participate in the second interview to reflect on her development prior to moving. She also made comparisons with the identity of the SENCo in her new school.

Fiona identified that the trust placed in her by the headteacher had a significant impact on the development of her professional identity and confidence. She noted that he was *“happy to say you know what you’re doing, get on with it.”* [F1:7:12-14] and had *“utter faith in what I was doing.”* [F2:9:14-10:2]. While acknowledging that he did not have the necessary knowledge and experience in SEN to ‘support’ her, she highly valued the trust that he placed in her [F2:11:13-12:4].

A greater challenge to the development of her professional identity had been her own perceptions and misperceptions of the role. While she had worried about knowing about specific SEN such as dyslexia, Fiona had found it easy to source training for this. Rather, the amount and necessity for paperwork had been harder [F1:16:14-17:6]. Prior to leaving her school, she said that she had been shocked when she had shared the role with her successor and realised that she *“had no idea, no idea! It was just so big! [...] it evolved over time [...] hugely”* [F2:21:8-13]. Fiona added that reading the Code of Practice enabled her to have a clearer understanding of the role [F2:17:14-18:2].

While acknowledging a very positive and supportive relationship with the headteacher, Fiona perceived that he did not fully understand the role. At times she felt he only saw the paperwork side of the role [F1:1:9-12] and did not understand *“just how huge the role is”* [F1:7:14-8:2]. During her second interview, Fiona reflected from her position as headteacher:

*“I think you see it different in schools where the headteacher has experience of SEN. Then I think there is a lot more understanding of what happens”* [F2:20:10-12].

Staff not understanding the role of SENCo or their responsibility for children with SEN created additional challenge for Fiona. She was seen by some as a problem solver and used words such as ‘magic wand’ and ‘fix’ to describe the way in which staff perceived her role [F1:8:4-10; F1: 8:12 – 9:5]. Even following whole school and individual training, Fiona felt that there were misperceptions

[F2:12:13 -13:3]. She noted that the TAs, who she line-managed, struggled with her identity and she was not *“sure whether they see me as their Inclusion Leader or Deputy Head”* [F1:11:15-16].

Fiona also experienced mixed understanding of the role by outside agencies. She explained that the Specialist Teaching Service had a good understanding, but other agencies, particularly from health *“seemed to think I would be delivering all the speech programmes.”* [F2:13:8-12] or *“want to talk to the SENCo more than they want to talk to the teacher [...] about how they present in class”* [F1:14:5-11].

Fiona considered that parental understanding had been enhanced through a range of parent engagement activities and information sharing and she now experiences more collaborative relationships with parents which she felt was aided by being a Deputy Head [F1:12:2-10].

While she receives support and understanding from most people that she works with, Fiona shared that *“it’s a very isolated role in school”* [F1:1:7-8] as *“you are the only person in that school doing that job”* [F1:21:6-7] and *“unless you have done it, it is not possible to have any idea how busy it is, how varied it is”* [F2:20:15-21:1]. Although generally very positive, Fiona noted that *“It can be a thankless job a lot of the time, I think”* [F1:14:1].

Fiona began her teaching career in the school in which she became Deputy Head and then SENCo, staying at the school for just over 20 years. Both interviews compared how SEN had been viewed before she took on the role to current practice, highlighting how the sharing of responsibility has changed over time. Her predecessor had acknowledged changes when the Code of Practice (DfES 2001a) was introduced but had maintained the same way of working, leaving other staff unaware [F2:8:1-6; F1:8:12-16]. With the introduction of the current Code of Practice (DfE/DoH 2015) Fiona shared that through training, *“It was such a huge shock to them that this whole thing even existed in the first place and the changes that were made to it about teachers’ accountability.”* [F2:8:6-8]. However, as a result, she feels that both teachers and the headteacher now know they share responsibility [F2:9:5-8].

During our discussions, Fiona shared a lack of clear identity [F1:1:3] and associated this with the varied roles and job descriptions of those carrying the title of SENCo, including herself [F1:2:2-6; F1:4:1; F1:5:1-5]. Added to this, Fiona noted that some people in her NASC cohort were shocked to learn that the role was strategic and not to spend a large amount of time working with children [F1:3:1-3]. During the second interview Fiona indicated that if she became SENCo in a new setting, her professional identity would not change [F2:6:13], but she noted that the professional identity of

the existing SENCO in the new setting was different due to that person's perceptions and understanding of the role.

A huge source of support for Fiona, which she said aided the development of her professional identity, was the local network of SENCOs. She described them as *"wonderful"* [F1:19:13; F2:11:7] and noted that *"they would say there is no such thing as a stupid question. We are all in the same boat"* [F1:19:14-15]. The group shared good practice and allowed opportunities such as peer moderation and observations of interventions. Within a year of taking on the role, they had given her so much confidence, that she was leading the group and perceived it to be vital in supporting those new to role [F1:19:16-20:8; F1:21:13-14; F2:15:12-16].

In contrast Fiona described the larger, local authority-led groups and events as less helpful due to lack of opportunity to share and having to *"listen to the jargon"* [F1:19:10-12]. She said it made her feel *"like a rabbit in the headlights and other than talking to some other SENCO's, you would come away feeling none the wiser"* [F2:14:3-14]. She stated that the smaller network was much better.

When considering her attributes as a SENCO it was clear that being part of the strategic leadership was important but also that she understood how this varied in other settings, noting that *"those of us with, who have a leadership capacity had more recognition of the strategic role than those who didn't."* [F1:2:5-11]. She recognised that the strategic focus had evolved over recent years but that this was challenging for some colleagues who had been in post longer [F2:7:4-6]. Fiona gave many examples of how her strategic leadership skills were useful including advising and supporting teachers while also holding them accountable [F1:9:3-5; F1:9:10-14; F1:12:14-16; F1:10:5-6]. Using these skills and her experience has allowed her to enable and empower others [F1:11:2-14; F1:10:16-11:2] and demonstrate effectiveness [F1:17:3-8]. Fiona also feels that her leadership role has promoted better relationships with parents who feel that being *"Deputy Head gives it more weight"* [F1:12:3-6]. Fiona stated: *"I like being strategic anyway."* [F2:4:9-10] and noted that she feels *"It's strategic. It should be a senior leadership role"* [F2:8:12-9:2].

Fiona demonstrated the need for emotional intelligence recognising that *"you have to be patient; you have to be a good listener"* [F2:3:16] and that *"being reflective is important"* [F2:5:10] in many areas of the role. She also acknowledged that being SENCO had a greater emotional impact on her than other roles that she has held.

*"I was aware that I was responsible for the most vulnerable children that we have, and I got a lot more frustrated with teachers who didn't take their role seriously. I had a lot of dealing with families who were going through a lot of upset [...] It's very difficult and I think I took a lot of that on board."* [F2:15:3-7]

To support these interactions, Fiona explained that excellent communication skills and sensitivity to individual needs were important. She recognised that sharing information could at times be 'alarming' and there was need to be gentle with parents [F1:5:10-14]. Being a careful listener and able to develop parental understanding has enabled Fiona to identify children's needs more accurately and promote parental confidence. Fiona explained that on occasions *"you have to be able to deliver tough messages to people...so you've got to have a little bit of bravery for those conversations."* [F2:6:2-7].

While acknowledging that the role should be strategic, in a small school Fiona also had operational duties. To manage this, she identified the need to streamline paperwork to fit with processes she used across the school. This enabled her to have a strategic understanding of needs, support and impact which is now collated in one document, making it far more efficient for her [F2:23:2-14].

Fiona noted her attributes to include being patient, reflective, a champion, having commitment, positivity and bravery. She also added the phrases computer literate and time management.

During the second interview, Fiona repeated her reflection of having a strong professional identity as a SENCo and made a link between this and recruitment and retention, saying:

*"I think that if you don't have that clarity, you're not going to be comfortable in what you're doing, you're not going to be confident in what you're doing and you're not going to do your best."* [F2:19:14-20:2]

Fiona felt strongly that her professional identity was underpinned by her beliefs and values that were intertwined with her faith, finding it hard to separate them out. She described the role as *"a very rewarding job"* [F1:17:12] and shared many examples of where she felt that she had been able to make a difference to others that expressed both values and beliefs. This included *"building up children's self-esteem, making them feel valued"* [F1:17:12-18:10], noticing that *"everyone has potential [...] we need to change the way we teach."* [F2:3:5-8] and being a *"champion"* [F2:4:1] who *"was fighting for them"* [F2:4:4-6]. When considering the word 'values', Fiona said *"All I can think of is Christian values at the moment"* [F2:4:2] and then discussed love and honesty [F2:5:10-6:1].

Although she had worked in the same school for just over 20 years, Fiona recognised that despite her teaching and leadership experience and knowledge of the local community, she did not have any knowledge of the role of SENCo [F2:10:4-5; F2:10:8-12]. Fiona seemed nervous about how this could undermine her role as Deputy Head. However, reflecting on her time as SENCo, she was able to recognise how in-service experiences had developed her and impacted the school [F2:19:5-7]. Fiona expressed concern that her successor lacked three important experiences: that of senior leadership [F2:18:6-8], background in SEN and whole class responsibility [F2:18:9-14]. In contrast to her own

(lack of) induction [F2:12:6-9], Fiona felt that existing experience could be enhanced through good induction, which she provided before leaving [F2:18:14-19:1] including introduction to the local network who had helped her [F2:15:15-16].

Throughout both interviews, Fiona often mentioned how fortunate she had been to access high quality training [F1:6:3-4; F1:6:16-7:5; F2:10:15-16; F2:11:2-3] which she would then cascade to all staff. Much of this was provided through the local outreach team. Fiona found *“training that is relevant and current”* [F2:4:13] and *“it was practical, [...] a good balance between heavy theory [...] and practical solutions [...] and then come back [with] a firm idea on what I’m doing.”* [F2:16:8-12].

Fiona had mixed feelings about the NASC course noting that *“The essays were not useful. Not at all! But the training, like the face-to-face days they were really useful.”* [F1:15:11-15]. On reflection, she also noted that those who had been in role prior to 2009 should also complete the course as she felt they *“are the ones who don’t have that strategic vision. They see it still in that operational, managing kind of thing.”* [F2:4:13-5:1]. Fiona recognised the need for continuing professional development throughout your career noting that *“There is so much more that needs to be done. [...] and knowing that you don’t know everything about special needs that there is”* [F2:5:6-8].

Fiona spoke both explicitly and implicitly about how training on the SEN Code of Practice and understanding the school’s SEN policy was important for her to understand her role and hence impacted on the development of her professional identity [F1:16:1; F2:17:8-9; F2:17:14-18:2]. She also alluded to how changes in local and national policy can impact on the SENCo such as increased administration and focus on effectiveness since she took on the role [F1:17:1-8]. Wider educational policy and practices such as financial constraints have also affected Fiona [F1:18:14-19:3].

#### **4.7 Grace’s experience**

Grace was interviewed on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2017 and 8<sup>th</sup> January 2018; she has subsequently been appointed headteacher at the school she had been working in.

Throughout both interviews Grace was highly positive about the support she has received and the impact of this on her practice and development of her professional identity. The length of some comments demonstrated the importance of this support from within school and outside agencies.

Grace explained how shared understanding with the headteacher is integral to her support network which also included the link governor for SEN [G1:19:5-9; G1:19:12]. She has found the Local Offer, a further form of support for herself and the parents [G2:20:1-7].

The fact that external support is *“all on traded services now”* [G1:24:1] adds a financial element to factors affecting Grace's support. To ensure time is used efficiently, Grace spoke about how she has developed professional relationships to aid communication and sharing of advice via phone calls and emails [G1:24:1-7] describing some professionals as *“amazing, fantastic, [...] an invaluable resource.”* [G2:12:7-9]. Conversely, she has found some agencies to be poor at feedback and communication [G1:20:13-16]. While understanding that many services are stretched, Grace finds those with long waiting lists or not accepting referrals, often result in issues becoming *“more complex, deeper”* [G1:24:8-25:5]. Occasionally she has perceived that some agencies *“do quite a lot of damage to our relationships with some of our parents”* [G2:12:9-15] when reports contain advice beyond their remit despite attempts to rectify this [G2:13:4]. This was clearly frustrating for Grace who queried whether this was due to some sort of professional hierarchy [G2:13:14-14:1].

Grace recognised how a shared understanding of the role contributed to the development of her professional identity, including changes in her own perceptions of the role. She initially found it:

*“different actually. It's very intense. [...] I didn't really think of the families, [...] and I don't think that I had thought of the wider effect of it.”* [G1:26:14-27:1]

Similarly, at the outset, Grace found staff relying on her to find solutions [G1:6:1-2] but through training for all staff, she explained how changes in understanding were having a positive impact for her and *“empowering”* others [G1:8:7-11; G2:12:1-3]. Grace constantly referenced the collegiate approach within her school but also acknowledged that without:

*“a supportive leadership team [...] you wouldn't have the respect of the teachers and [...] you wouldn't actually belong to a group for your own support, [...] that could affect retention.”* [G2:21:4-9]

Examples of shared responsibility were evident throughout both interviews [G1:20:2-3] with use of the pronoun 'we', indicating a team approach [G2:16:9-10'; G1:3:1-2; G1:25:10-11] with whole school focus on *“what we are really interested in”, and “our school”* and [G1:25:16-26:11].

Grace expressed that having a shared focus with the leadership team *“sets the tone for the school”* [G2:7:8-9] and that within her setting *“the children came first – there are no staff egos or anything, it's all about the children and I completely buy into that vision”* [G2:7:9-11] which is backed up by the headteacher getting to know all families and understanding what staff need [G2:7:15-8:2].

In trying to understand whether she shares her professional identity with others, Grace acknowledged that in her setting she has *“lots of different roles”* [G1:28:16] or *“lots of hats”* [G2:5:5]. While across schools she recognised that what people do may be similar, she also felt that her professional identity had been shaped by her personality and leadership role in the school [G2:6:2-8; G2:6:12-13]. Grace compared this with variation in teachers where some *“do above and*



*beyond what their job description is because they have got that personality where they dig a bit deeper” [G2:6:13-7:3].*

Grace has found support through both formal and informal networks, noting contact with people from her NASC course and others from her local consortium as most useful, particularly when she was new to role as they would explain anything that she did not understand [G1:14:4-10] and they often formed a working party to consider how to respond to policy changes [G2:19:14-15]. Grace acknowledges that the local authority termly Forum meetings provide updates but commented about not having chance to discuss more complex issues in such a large group, adding that *“We need more time to network. It’s powerful.” [G2:14:7-15:6]* and that *“it would be more powerful to have those information conversations with people.” [G2:15:15-16].*

Grace identified her leadership experience as one of her main attributes contributing to her professional identity as a SENCo as she holds the dual roles of Deputy Head (with teaching and learning as her main area of responsibility) and SENCo and was previously Acting Headteacher. She developed this to share her view that:

*“I think it’s your professionalism – you support teachers, [...] they know I’ve got their back, [...] taking responsibility, being a role model, showing that you are working hard [...] I won’t ask a member of staff to do something if I am not prepared to do it myself because that’s not fair.” [G2:9:9-10:5]*

Grace provided numerous examples of how she uses her strategic leadership skills which are integral to her identity including *“helping to drive changes” [G1:1:5-7]*, and *“you do any monitoring, that it’s purposeful, you’ve got actions that you go back and follow up, that you support your colleagues.” [G1:3:15-4:4]*. The skills are also used to improve staff responsibility and accountability through ensuring they are proactive [G1:5:2-6] and know how to work effectively as a team [G1:6:5-12]. Grace feels these skills have enabled her to drive up standards and empower people through use of data and performance management. This has included giving TAs the same performance management targets as teachers [G1:6:14-7:4] and providing alternative methods to show impact [G1:8:4-9; G1:8:14-16].

As a senior leader, Grace sees herself as an agent for change, and uses training to enable and empower other people. She has introduced fortnightly TA CPD with *“time to share good practice” [G1:10:3-11]* and ensuring appropriate staff are involved for external agency visits [G1:9:4-7] or changing whole school approaches or language to have greater impact [G1:11:14- 12:16]. Grace also stated that change has been enabled through being on the leadership team and respected [G1:10:15], particularly within a well-established staff [G1:18:6-11].



While understanding financial constraints, Grace noted that *“in terms of cost effectiveness...it does make sense, because to be a non-teaching deputy is quite a luxury”* [G1:1:11-12]. She also stated that *“it is easier to champion things in your own school and to get systems in place”* [G1:30:1-3].

Conversely, she recognised the challenges of not being on the leadership team, such as not having that level of:

*“responsibility, that rigour, that challenge that if you are tracking these children and you’re meeting with parents [...] you should be challenged by governors [...] so if you are being held to account you also need to get that recognition that you are a leader.”* [G2:8:6-15]

Grace was clear that if she was not on the leadership team it would affect her professional identity [G2:9:3-4].

Throughout our interactions, Grace’s emotional intelligence was evident. She commented directly on this twice and made numerous other comments that alluded to the need for empathy for others [G1:28:15-15; G1:29:2-5]. Grace also explained how she had not considered the emotional impact of the role and need for emotional awareness as:

*“It’s very intense [...] That’s actually been quite draining and you can really worry about some of these kids and take it home with you [...] So, I’ve had to do a little bit of, you know, this is what I can do and I can’t do anything about that, but focus on the things that I can do [...] the emotional side of it that’s difficult”* [G1:26:14-28:6]

Within this and another example, it was the burden of the emotion that came across, with Grace noting *“that’s just part of the job role”* [G2:16:6-7] and adding that the leadership team support each other with this so that they do not take it home with them. Grace reasoned that this may be *“about professionalism and if you are in a professional role, you learn to deal with it better.”* [G2:16:3-17:2] and suggested this may be due to training.

Amongst her attributes which have aided development of her professional identity, Grace considered communication skills to be very important. This included being available to parents [G1:15:3-11; G2:4:12-15]; the ability to listen carefully and value parental contributions [G1:15:14-16; G2:3:15-16] and a need for sensitivity and consideration of the audience so that there is shared understanding of needs and actions [G1:24:5-7]. Strategically she has used coaching and mentoring to improve staff understanding about how to speak with parents [G1:5:12-14]. Grace recognised that some *“parents aren’t comfortable speaking to them”* [G2:5:1-2] and at these times she asks them to *“come in to have a cup of tea with X [support worker] and me and that’s fine, it doesn’t bother me, as long as they are in and talking”* [G1:16:8-14]. In addition to direct conversations, Grace showed awareness of the demands of email communication and the need to use this appropriately [G1:19:2] and to communicate with some stake holders regularly to ensure they feel supported [G2:18:4-9].

On a daily or operational level, Grace identified effective administration and reliability as essential. While stating that she can cope with paperwork because it's *"logical [...] and it's factual"* [G1:27:11-13], she also acknowledged that it is:

*"really heavy, [...] You've got to be really organised and clear with your paper trail, because ultimately, to support any child, you have got to have a trail of evidence."* [G1:28:11-15]

In addition to this, Grace also noted the importance of giving prompt responses to requests for help [G1:15:3-14; G1:10:16] and the ability to find answers to questions that people have [G1:20:3-5; G1:23:4-14].

These characteristics were also evident when Grace used the following words to describe some of her attributes: professional, non-judgemental, accessible and approachable. Her flexibility was shown through initially covering the SENCo role and then taking this on as she saw the benefit to the school of a dual role [G1:1:4-10], adding during both interviews that despite not choosing to apply for the role, she found that *"I love it!"* [G2:11:13-14].

Grace recognised passion as a key attribute for success as a SENCo.

*"you have got to be passionate about children [...] and this is something that [NASC tutor] taught me. They're not an SEN child, they are a child with SEN, and that actually really changes how you see children."* [G1:3:12-15]

Alongside this, she noted that *"I'm quite focused and driven."* [G1:10:14-15] and *"You have got to like hard work."* [G1:28:10]. While portraying confidence, Grace was also very modest [G1:10:15] and noted that at times *"You do begin to doubt yourself. Teachers are naturally reserved, and we don't go and show off"* [G1:21:3-5].

Grace related beliefs to fairness and compassion; values to every child learning and making progress; and motives as the child's barriers being addressed [G1:25:13-14; G1:29:10-13; G2:3:12-16; G2:5:6-8]. Grace's child-centred approach was evident throughout and exemplified when she said:

*"you have to justify yourself to the headteacher, governors, parents, children – they are most important."* [G2:18:4-8]

Grace spoke openly of the knowledge gained through her leadership experience; however, she also identified her 15 years of teaching experience as crucial background knowledge for the role [G1:4:10-15; G1:6:2-4; G2:18:13-16]. Grace expressed some concern about how her experience would change and impact the role as she had not done whole class teaching for 3 years since taking on leadership roles noting that you can *"forget very easily what it is like having to have all the children with their different identities and all different things that go on [...] you have to [...] remember what the actual pressures are like in the classroom"* [G2:10:5-10].

Having taken on the role to cover another member of staff, Grace did not have a formal induction to the role, but noted that she *“went on the training, quite quickly after. So, then I met a group of SENCOs that went on the course and [...] I went to visit a lot of schools”* [G2:11:4-14] and the governors *“were very supportive of me doing the SENCO course”* [G1:19:8-9].

Grace has continued to seek opportunities to gain knowledge through training and described the quality as *“good, high”* [G2:17:12]. This has come from several sources including being:

*“part of the forum group and the informal group which are friends. I attend all the external training, so even if it's for the TA's, I attend it; I read a lot of things [...] If there is ever any on at [local outreach], [...] and Dr [EP], we found her useful”* [G1:21:10-23:1]

Grace recognises the need to prioritise training that is needed to support pupils in the school and to manage this in terms of time and finances, however, she feels that she has this *“about right.”* [G2:17:7-13]. Grace is alert to the need to continually improve her knowledge to best support the children and staff at the school saying that *“if I don't understand something, I will say, I need to find out”* [G1:23:4-11].

#### 4.8 Holly's experience

Holly's interview was held on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2017. Holly was unable to attend the second interview, as she had to cover a class at the last minute. I was told that she retired a few months later, at the end of the academic year.

At the beginning of her interview, Holly juxtaposed two positions – that of being *‘in charge’* of several teams who interact to meet the needs of the pupils, suggesting sharing of responsibility, and considering *“the SENCO job as a subsidiary of what I do”* [H1:2:4-14]. Holly was very proud that the school continues to have a high number of TAs and that responsibility is shared through maximising their impact, stating that *“of course our TAs don't cover lessons. They do amazing interventions.”* [H1:7:1-2] and *“they are all doing fabulous work”* [H1:9:9-10].

Holly has a clear understanding of her own identity as *“Assistant Headteacher here since 2002”* [H1:2:15-16] and that *“I don't call myself a SENCO at all, because, this sounds awful, but in my head, I am senior to a SENCO, because I have managed the SENCOs for years here, but it was only part of my leadership role.”* [H1:1:4-7]. Although noting that there is an Assistant SENCO in the school, Holly did not demonstrate an experience of sharing her professional identity with this person or other colleagues within or beyond the school.

Although she commented on having been teaching for 32 years in 7 schools, it was her leadership status that she considered most important stating that *“Teaching is hierarchical in its management structure and in its responsibility structure.”* [H1:1:3-7]. At times she implied that her *“area of expertise”* [H1:3:8-12] now gave her greater credence than some of her senior colleagues.

Holly described many positive aspects of her leadership style including being strategic [H1:9:4], proactive [H1:7:14] and managing staff effectively through *“really strict performance management and they all go for training”* [H1:7:2-4]. She also discussed the need to direct staff on their use of time and the need to secure a work-life balance [H1:15:7-16:2].

Class teacher accountability and responsibility is both supported by Holly through her trialling and disseminating strategies [H1:14:3-7], and by ensuring that the class teacher directly liaises with a parent when concerns are raised, noting that *“sometimes staff don’t like it! Well, no. SEN is your job.”* [H1:16:9-15].

Sometimes the language in other examples of Holly’s leadership style was less positive and related to her view of the hierarchy of leadership using phrases such as *“people are quite scared of me.”* [H1:4:6-9] and *“I do have a lot of power. Perhaps autonomy is a better word, not power.”* [H1:8:16-9:2]. Stating that someone is available to screen her calls also showed that Holly was only prepared to take unsolicited calls from people with a particular status [H1:16:5-9].

When considering attributes that aid her professional identity, Holly was keen to explain why she and her colleagues *“can quite appear quite hard”*, noting that *“We’re not hard, but we are very pragmatic, [...] You can’t get emotional. [...] it is a very different role to teaching”* [H1:13:4-8].

As a line-manager for several teams, Holly mainly focuses on the strategic side of the role, but through reflecting on those that she had line-managed, she identified operational skills that were important including being *“good dealing with staff, [and] supporting children’s learning”* [H1:8:4]. It was through reflecting on what she felt was not done well that she identified what else was important including maintaining paperwork, securing funding, providing additional support [H1:8:6-8] and being able to manage lots of agency and new staff [H1:11:1-13] to ensure that the students have what they need.

From the outset, Holly demonstrated flexibility and confidence in taking on the SENCO role at short notice sharing that *“Recruiting someone new to the school seemed ridiculous when I already had some knowledge,”* [H1:1:16-2:2]. However, it was through her reflections of the Assistant SENCO (Isabel) that Holly illustrated what she perceived as some of the most important attributes for a SENCO including someone who *“goes not just the extra mile, she goes an extra hundred mile. [...] to*

*be able to employ people with that passion is good.*" [H1:8:11-16] and referring to her as *"an absolute powerhouse of energy and determination and creativity and she is very clever and has got such stamina."* [H1:14:9-10].

Holly recognised the whole team's positive work ethic as a commitment to supporting the students noting that they *"work flat out."* [H1:5:5-7] and *"they're not clock watchers"* [H1:14:12-16]. Having shared the need for a work-life balance, she also noted that *"it would be very stressful trying to do the job just in office hours, because it isn't possible."* [H1:15:2-4]. This showed a reality of the intensity of the role.

Throughout the interview, Holly cited many examples of how she is confident to challenge and manage staff and is competent in dealing with *"difficult situations"* [H1:12:9]. This extended to having discussions with more senior members of staff at school and within the local authority regarding opportunities to secure and spend funding [H1:4:14-5:1; H1:5:11-15].

While Holly was happy in the role, she asserted that retention may be affected by those with a lack of a clear identity or because *"it is a thankless job."* [H1:4:10-14].

Holly explained how teaching Year 7 pupils gave her an insight into their needs and that she would *"hate not to teach"* [H1:13:10-13] but went on to explain that is only manageable *"if you have got the admin support"* [H1:13:8-10]. She also noted that her route into the role was aided through knowledge gained from line-managing her predecessors and training on the Code of Practice that they had delivered [H1:3:14-4:2; H1:7:10-14]. Other than completion of NASC, Holly did not mention any other training nor a need for further training.

Holly referred to the impact of policy and guidance documents in relation to completing the statutory NASC course, she made links with policies for other vulnerable groups [H1:2:1-8] and the recommendation that the SENCo should be part of the school's leadership team [H1:4:9-14].

#### **4.9 Isabel's experience**

Isabel was interviewed on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2017 and 7<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

During the second interview, Isabel shared that from the start of the next academic year, she had been appointed as the SENCo, following Holly's retirement, and was also going to be head of a new unit for the pupils with Hearing Impairment.

Throughout the interviews, Isabel gave examples of how *“being given the opportunity to [...work] in my own way [...] and being trusted that I was doing a good job and then being supported when I needed the support.”* [I1:10:12-15] was very important at the start of her role as SENCo.

In school, support came from the leadership team [I1:10:14-16; I1:22:6-10] who she felt *“set the tone”* [I2:10:11-13], and specifically the SENCo/ Assistant Head and the Deputy Head who was also Isabel's mentor [I1:11:4-13]. Isabel distinguished between staff who could encourage her and allow developmental opportunities [I2:16:3-7] or *“professional investment”* [I1:11:9] although may not understand the role fully enough to represent her in senior leadership meetings [I2:16:10-14], and those who have the knowledge and experience to support her [I2:16:8-11]. Isabel spoke very positively about the collegiate, team approach which has aided her in managing the workload and sharing the emotional aspects of the role [I2:14:11-15:7]. Isabel also noted that *“there are good support groups online”* [I2:18:13].

In addition to the support that she receives, Isabel's confidence seems to have been boosted by the appreciation of her support by the students who now see her as *“an advocate [...] trying to do something with them.”* [I1:6:2-6] as *“more students come to me”* (I1:12:2) asking for help.

Isabel's experience of the role has differed from her expectations which she said was because she now works across the whole school and with many external agencies [I1:9:7-10]. She added that:

*“there are so many variables and you have to deal with people...to negotiate with all different people and with all different roles”* [I1:2:1-5]

Rather than being overwhelmed by this, Isabel said that it has been *“unbelievable”* and that it has made her a *“better person”* with *“broader horizons”* who can now see *“the bigger picture”*, twice stating that while it is a *“challenge”*, she loves it [I1:9:7-10:8] and the role is *“much richer than I thought.”* [I1:20:7-11].

However, sometimes a lack of understanding can be a source of frustration when parents, staff and external agencies always default to asking the SENCo if a student is struggling [I1:15:2-5] and Isabel noted half-jokingly that:

*“it seems like inside school and outside is like the SENCo is the answer for everything. You know, if you don't know, even about sending a letter, go and ask the SENCo! We have the answer!”* [I1:15:10-15]

As the leadership team have promoted an inclusive culture, Isabel feels that staff now have a better understanding of her role [I2:18:16-20:2] although noted the need to continually improve communication.

Reflecting on how these factors have affected the development of her professional identity, Isabel made a link with recruitment and retention and how you are perceived by others compared to the reality of the role [I2:24:12-16]. At the second interview, Isabel had recently been told about her promotion and noted how the job title impacts on perception and holds *“some kind of weight”* [I2:12:3-6], adding that having a strong professional identity can *“also have a strong sense of making the senior leadership listen really within the school”* [I2:24:16-25:3].

Although enjoying working within the SEN team and with Holly, Isabel was embarrassed at how little connection she had with other local SENCo's [I2:2: 4-5]. She shared that this is exacerbated by her being unable to attend some events or training due to teaching examination classes adding that the timing of the Local Authority Annual Conference was *“awful for us.”* and that they need *“to organise events when we can go, to attend and be active”*. Isabel implied that at times the isolation is due to the nature of the role itself, sharing that:

*“SEN is like its own world, its own cosmos, and you don't have time once you're started.”*  
[I2:20:14-15]

Both interviews showed how optimistic and enthusiastic Isabel is about her role, but she did share some frustration about some of the ways in which the Local Authority works with schools, students, and their families. She felt that a clearer understanding of practices would enable more efficient relationships [I1:19:4-20:3] through more focused shared responsibilities.

Isabel considers shared responsibility for inclusion [I2:6:16-7:1; I2:10:3-5] alongside Holly, who is a senior leader [I2:9:14-10:1], vital to secure change. She also asserted the need for good, considerate communication to help overcome *“resistance”* [I1:13:5] due to staff having busy workloads. Isabel explained how she tries to give *“ownership to other people”* [I1:14:3-7] so that they can generate their own ideas or shares concise information via emails *“so people have a bit of background information, not just out of the blue.”* [I1:13:5-14].

Isabel recognised that the role of SENCo is affected by both what you are required to do and individual traits and experiences, noting that within her setting, she and Holly would have different professional identities because *“it's really personal”* [I2:7:12]. However, several times, she suggested the need for a generic identity based on aspects of the role that are common to all SENCo's [I2:9:3-8] and to improve confidence levels adding that:

*“you can't give an absolute script because you need to be able to bend and be flexible and use life experience, but I think it is necessary for a starting point.”* [I2:8:1-5]

Within the Children's Team in her setting Isabel feels they probably *“share the same attributes, beliefs and values”* but that their motivations and experiences are different [I2:15:11-16]. She feels that a shared identity is important as:



*“we have to belong somewhere to give us meaning, so some type of identity initially is good, you know, to be settled.”* [I2:22:8-10]

During both interviews, Isabel identified attributes that have aided her development as SENCo. Building on her previous role as Head of Department, she now recognises how whole-school systems and understanding the *“dynamics”* [I1:13:1-4] of all departments is important. To develop these skills, Isabel had a leadership secondment within school to lead and manage a whole-school project which she found invaluable [I1:17:7-9]. However, as Assistant SENCo, she often reflected on the more reactive and operational activities that she manages such as communication [I1:4:13], training [I1:14:12-13] and being:

*“a mediator [...] a role model, [...] a sort of guidance for school and staff of how to be inclusive, [...] to monitor and to evaluate as well, [...] And to ensure that the children’s SEN, the children with SEN’s voices are heard”* [I1:6:12-7:6]

Isabel explicitly identified empathy with everyone she works with as very important [I2:5:4-5] and demonstrated emotional intelligence throughout both interviews. In particular, she focused on how her experience as a teacher impacts the ability to provide guidance [I1:4:7-11; I1:13:5-10] and recognised that pupils:

*“are not developed emotionally – the fact that they look like adults, but they are not adults, you know, and it is very, very confusing, you know. [...] they are struggling.”* [I2:4:4-7].

Another characteristic of Isabel that was both explicitly mentioned as important and evident during the interviews was taking time to stop and think, being reflective. She noted that you need *“to question your beliefs, your experiences”* [I1:2:10-15] and to *“admit if things are not working, you know? And to change.”* [I2:5:5-7]. Isabel feels that this process makes her *“a better person”* [I2:21:5] and prevents her being too reactionary.

Isabel stated that you need a clear professional identity to be settled emotionally so that you can *“look after the students or families.”* [I2:22:10-12].

In addition to ensuring that you do communicate, Isabel noted that you also need to be *“mindful”* [I1:13:6-14], be able to *“negotiate [...]and] be completely flexible in your approach”* [I1:2:4-6] and understand your audience [I2:9:10-13]. Communication has different purposes: it may be to convey information to staff, to promote student voice [I1:7:3], or to be an *“advocate”* and *“role model”* for students [I1:7:7-10]. Isabel highlighted the importance of two-way communication so that the other person feels valued, including empowering staff to support students [I1:14:2] or seeing that a parent needs to be *“listened to and taken seriously.”* [I1:22:16], sharing that she will *“report back what they are actually feeling and then comes a lull.”* [I1:23:3]. Some of her skills can be summarised by the words *“mediator”* [I1:6:12] and *“friendly ear”* [I1:9:4].



Due to the operational nature of her role, a key skill that she mentioned was the need to be *“organised, you know being organised and delegating – very important to delegate.”* [I2:5:7-8].

Another key characteristic was the need to be open-minded or flexible, which was mentioned many times [I1:2:6-10; I1:1:13-15; I1:22:10-11]. Isabel captured herself in the following quotation:

*“A happy person, I would say flexibility in all things – so I am flexible emotionally, flexible intellectually, also as well, energy-wise! It takes some flexibility to ssh [stop gesture] and [...] not be afraid to change”* [I2:5:2-6]

Isabel had a very positive attitude throughout both interviews expressing a love for the job even though it can be challenging [I1:10:8-9], noting that she is *“passionate”* [I1:17:9] and the job is *“richer than I thought.”* [I1:20:10-11] and a *“very rewarding job”* [I1:22:6].

Isabel shared that her decision to become a SENCO was *“To be a professional, you know, just for a career”* [I2:7:5-9], adding that it linked with her beliefs about helping pupils to be their best and her inclusive values. Through both interviews Isabel exemplified her *“person-centred approach”* [I1:3:7] and her desire to help all students be *“a better person”* [I1:3:8; I1:18:7-8] or *“a happy person”* [I1:3:8] and to *“be fulfilled and to just have, you know the human kind of things you want for kids really.”* [I2:5:8-12].

The word *values* caused Isabel some concern as she initially related it with her childhood experience of catholic religious values which although she said were good, also felt *“imposed”* [I2:6:4] upon her. After some consideration, she stated that *“My value is inclusive as long as it works and it’s positive and nobody is damaged by it or is suffering for it”.* [I2:6:14-15].

It was clear that underpinning Isabel’s beliefs and values was her focus on understanding the pupils that she works with and their needs, to help them overcome any barriers in learning or their wider life experience. She noted the importance of having a *“connection with the person”* [I1:3:12] which goes beyond verbal communication so that they will open up. Isabel considers this *“a privileged position”* [I1:5:14] and the need to recognise that even if their behaviour is aggressive *“behind all that there is a child and you know, how can they be fulfilled [...] It’s not up to me to decide what it is, you know, but I just have to help them to develop.”* [I2:5:12-6:4]. Isabel has found *“personal meaning”* [I1:18:4] as she sees it as *“part of helping new generations, you know, being good contributors to society, making society”* [I1:18:7] noting that she is *“invested in it, it’s humbling, I love it.”* [I1:18:4-19:1].

For Isabel important experiences included: academic/pedagogy in practice, being a teacher [I1:4:7; I1:8:4], being in the classroom, dynamics [I1:8:7], variability, the age group. Although recognising

that some SENCo's do not teach, Isabel was clear that some current teaching experience is necessary to maintain understanding of the role, saying that *"they possibly go hand in hand."* [1:8:11].

During the second interview, Isabel said that *"it looks crazy when you start but gradually you do it automatically."* [12:8:6-7] and she now feels more confident and can make decision more quickly [12:12:8-11], showing the impact of experience. She also demonstrated more strategic, whole-school thinking noting that with experience *"you can think more at the same time [...] also see different things because you bring so many processes to be part of it so you don't break it to different parts and so you can see much bigger as well."* [12:13:6-7]. Isabel feels her interactions are *"more natural [and] more knowledgeable"* [12:13:13-14]. The experience has impacted on Isabel personally giving her *"broader horizons"* [11:9:13-15] and improving her *"understanding of the role of the teacher"* [11:23:10-12]. Isabel shared how the experience has been both challenging and motivating as she constantly learns new things and has new responsibilities such as leading a new hearing unit [12:14:1-7].

In contrast to the enthusiastic comments about how experience has helped Isabel develop, she did not feel that she had a good induction to the role due to the speed at which she was appointed. However, with her ever-positive outlook, Isabel said that perhaps this was a good thing as *"sometimes you can pick up the wrong things."* [12:18:5] whereas she built on her existing good relationship with the SEN team, then completed the SENCo course after a year in role and found other support online [12:18:3-14].

During the first interview, Isabel mentioned a few one-day courses that she had attended [11:16:8-17:1], her completion of a leadership secondment and the Access Arrangements training course. However, she also linked training with the opportunity to discuss cases with external agencies *"every time we have someone in"* [11:22:2-4] so that she can better understand the barriers or ways to support the students. Isabel has been proactive in her continuing professional development through seeking *"the next step"* [12:16:5-6]. She identified that the role offered her the opportunity *"to learn more [...] And so, for me it was to learn new skills, [...] working with different people."* [11:21:8-13]. In terms of the future, Isabel identified a desire to better understand how systems within the Local Authority work together to *"have a better impact or better influence"* [11:20:2-3].

During the second interview, Isabel reflected on how interactions between the SENCo and the leadership team can be enhanced or impeded by national guidance or policies, depending on how they are interpreted locally. She shared her view that *"all the league tables, all the systems for the way schools are judged upon are not helpful"* [12:24:1] as *"on one side we are saying, let's be inclusive, let's have a person-centred approach and on the other side are all the curriculum changes*

*and exams*" [12:24:4-5]. Isabel expressed some concern that when Holly retires, she will no longer have a strong link with SLT adding:

*"that's the reason why the legislation suggests that the SENCo should be on the leadership team because no-one who has not done it can understand the SENCo and the meaning of SEN [...] it's very complex."* [12:17:8-10].

#### **4.10 Chapter summary**

This chapter presented the lived experiences of the newly qualified SENCo's as I have understood it through the double hermeneutic of me making sense of their understanding. This gave a privileged and unique insight into the way in which each of the newly qualified SENCo's understand and experience their professional identity. The length of each person's contribution differs due to the unique experiences that they described based on the range of roles and responsibilities they hold. Having looked in detail at each of their individual experiences, the next chapter will consider themes that emerged across the participants.

## Chapter 5: Analysis of themes

### 5.1 Chapter overview

Having considered the experience of each participant individually in Chapter 4, this chapter presents the themes that emerged across the participants' experiences. This was used to explore whether there was consensus or disparity in how they understood their experiences of their new professional identity.

### 5.2 Introduction

Having looked in detail at each person's experience, the next stage of the analysis involved cross-participant analysis (see 3.8 for details). While the use of software had been considered, researcher immersion in the data was chosen to ensure that the nuances of language were not lost. Transcripts were printed and sections physically manipulated to group potential themes together onto very large sheets of paper (Appendix 6). Through carrying out this process, some themes were deemed less important, while others emerged.

This resulted in the initial identification of the following superordinate and sub-ordinate themes (Figure 4):



Figure 4

The data from individual participants was reviewed using the new themes, but with an open mind to record other data that was deemed to be important. Analysed transcripts (appendix 6) provides transparency to the process and offers an insight into how my own understanding evolved from the

participants expressing and making meaning of their lived experiences – the double hermeneutic of IPA (Smith *et al*, 2009).

Following the second close analysis of individuals, further cross-case analysis of all participants' data was carried out using the original super- and sub-ordinate themes to explore how a group of newly qualified SENCOs experienced the development of their professional identity. This further evolved the focus of the themes that had emerged to highlight both common and distinct experiences.

Even following the hermeneutic cycle of analysis, interesting comments that fed into the identification of themes remained substantial and as in Chapter 4, I have had to be selective in choosing which quotations to include and which to illustrate through markers. Table 5 shows the superordinate and subordinate themes that emerged from the analysis, along with an indication of which participants' experiences contributed to each. It is important to note that within IPA, it is not the frequency of occurrence that is important, but how that comment helps the reader to understand the lived experience of the participant (Smith *et al*, 2009).

Table 5 showing superordinate and sub-ordinate themes.

<b>Superordinate themes</b>	<b>Sub-ordinate themes</b>	<b>Participants experience of theme</b>
Experience of relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The experience of understanding and expectations</li> <li>• The importance of trust</li> <li>• The experience of support</li> <li>• The experience of isolation</li> <li>• Other tensions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• C,D,E,F,G,H,I</li> <li>• C,D,E,F,G,H,I</li> <li>• C,D,E,F,G,H,I</li> <li>• C,E,F,G,I</li> <li>• F,I</li> </ul>
Experience of sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The experience of shared responsibility</li> <li>• The experience of shared interest or focus</li> <li>• The experience of shared identity and experiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• C,D,E,F,G,H,I</li> <li>• C,D,E,F,G</li> <li>• C,D,E,F,G,H,I</li> </ul>
Identification of their attributes as a SENCO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic leadership skills</li> <li>• Emotional intelligence</li> <li>• Communication skills</li> <li>• Operational skills</li> <li>• Demeanour</li> <li>• Beliefs and values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• D,E,F,G,H,I,</li> <li>• D,E,F,G,H,I,</li> <li>• E,F,G,I</li> <li>• F,G,H,I</li> <li>• C,D,E,F,G,H,I</li> <li>• C,D,E,F,G,I</li> </ul>
The importance of knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge gained through experience</li> <li>• Knowledge gained through induction</li> <li>• Knowledge gained through training</li> <li>• Desire for more knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• C,D,E,F,G,H,I</li> <li>• C,D,E,F,G,I</li> <li>• C,D,E,F,G,H,I</li> <li>• C,D,E,F,G,I</li> </ul>
The experience of policy and guidance in relation to professional identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SEN policy and Local Authority practise</li> <li>• Wider education policies and practises</li> <li>• How policies are communicated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• C,D,E,F,G,H,I</li> <li>• D,E,F,I</li> <li>• C,D,E,F,G,I</li> </ul>

### 5.3 What does 'professional identity' mean to the participants?

As all interviews focused on how participants perceived their professional identity, an attempt was made to see what they understood by this phrase at the start of the first interview. This resulted in a range of responses from direct recount of what the SENCo does: *"I see myself as specialising in SEN...coordinating and putting in place whatever extra interventions are needed."* [D1:1:5-6] or having *"statutory things...your job description"* [G1:2:4-5], to comments regarding perceptions of themselves and others:

*"it is what I see myself as and what my role is, but also what other people see my role as"*  
[C1:1:8-9]

*"how you see yourself, what your role is, what you're trained to do I guess."* [D1:2:2-3]

*"I guess your identity is how other people view you as well, so if you say to someone, I'm the SENCo it's about what they think your job is going to entail."* [G1:2:5-7]

A broader definition was given by Isabel who stated:

*"professional identity is who you identify with and skill and how you think about the job, the values, the beliefs that you have, because obviously that will have an impact on how you do the job and your experiences which you have, and ultimately the person you are and who you want to become really because I think you see that, it comes across really. It's personal and professional. They interact of course."* [I1:1:2-9]

This exemplified that the term professional identity does not have a commonly shared or well-rehearsed definition among the participants. Through further discussion a better understanding of how each of the participants experience their own professional identity was achieved.

### 5.4: Experience of relationships

Interactions with other people are central to how the participants experience their professional identity. They all described how relationships with colleagues in school, students, parents, external agencies and SENCos within their locality determine how they are perceived by others and how these impact on them.

#### 5.4.1. Understanding and expectations

All interviews demonstrated that the participants' own understanding and expectations of the role, alongside the views of staff, parents and outside agencies, shaped how they perceived themselves. They described how relationships with others are both strengthened and challenged by understanding and expectations of the role.

During their reflections, they all acknowledged that the reality of the role of SENCo was different to how they had thought it would be, including administration, use of data, increased interactions with other people and the way in which they are now perceived by colleagues.

David encapsulated the feelings of others indicating that:

*“whilst it’s everything that I expected it to be, it’s also more than I expected it to be.”*  
[D1:16:6-7]

Six participants commented on the volume of administration and use of data being greater than they had imagined. It was described as *“too much”* [F2:23:3] and *“really heavy”* [G1:28:11], with Fiona quantifying that she spends *“90% of my time dealing with that”* [F1:16:14-15]. For Holly, the surprise was finding *“the holes, the paperwork. Why it mattered”* [H1:11:1-2] which highlighted her increased awareness of the amount and need for paperwork once she had taken on the role rather than line-managing it. While all showed acceptance of paperwork, two participants highlighted how this was affecting the way in which they had perceived the role: Emma stated that she wanted a balance and not to become *“a slave to paperwork”* [E1:8-9]; Claire was more resigned that paperwork *“can crowd out time with the children, so it’s not quite as hands on as you might like.”* [C1:7:16-8:2].

While some participants focused on processes, others reflected on how the human aspect of the role differed from their expectations. Grace noted the intensity of working with families and shared her view that she had not thought *“of the wider effect of it”* [G1:26:16-27:1] and that *“it’s the emotional side of it that’s difficult”* [G1:27:13-14]. In addition to parental interactions, Isabel shared her experience of working with many different professionals and how this had been different to her role as a subject leader as she now needs *“to negotiate with all different people and with all different roles”* [I1:2:1-5].

Holly had prior understanding of the role from line-managing her predecessors and felt able to build on that and existing systems. Similarly, for Fiona and Grace, adding the role of SENCo made sense as *“the two job roles together does fit quite well”* [G1:1:12-13]. Other participants, expressed greater discrepancy between their expectations and the reality of the role although for David, Emma, and Isabel, this has been positive *“because it’s much richer than I thought.”* [I1:20:11]

For Claire, the reality has been more of a challenge which she attributed to her setting [C1:2:9-11] and not being part of the leadership team creating a sense of disharmony for her as she established herself in a new school:

*“I don’t get any say in how TA’s are allocated, how my time is used and [...] how the role of SENCo’s as we were told it should be on the course, [...] it’s very different from how it is seen here in an independent school.”* [C1:8:6-9]



All participants spoke about how their identity as SENCo is affected by other peoples' understanding of the role and what they do [I1:15:2-13] including whether they are seen as a specialist [D1:1:6] or a teacher [D1:4:8-10]. Most participants reflected on how staff perceptions were based on their prior experiences, with Claire expressing that this was based on what her predecessor had done [C1:1:12-14; C1:3:1-2] and both David and Emma sharing the belief that staff see them *"as the person who should know what is going on"* [D1:8:1] and *"expect me to be more knowledgeable"* [E1:5:5-6].

The language used suggests that some of the staff perceive the children with additional needs to be 'problems' [C1:4:1-2; C2:11:9-10; F1:8:4; F2:10:9] that the SENCo should take responsibility for. Some participants spoke hesitantly at times indicating that they did not want to be disloyal to their colleagues but seemed to be expressing a level of frustration at the abdication of responsibility for some children.

*"they will come to me and say can I sort it out. [...] If there's a square peg in a round hole, they will send that peg to me. Wave your magic wand kind of thing."* [C1:4:1-10]

*"I think teachers can't get away with the thought that the SENCo has a magic wand. They haven't. They still don't always take the responsibility for being the SEN teacher"* [E2:6:3-5]

Within their discussions, use of phrases like *'magic wand'* [C1:4:10; E2:6:4] or being expected to have the *'magic the answer'* [F1:8:7] emphasised that these SENCos perceive the teachers' views to be unrealistic, while phrases such as *'keep on top of'* [E2:7:1], *'jump the gun'* [E2:7:2] and *'fix'* [C1:4:7; F1:8:13] highlight their frustration at teachers' attitudes resulting in the role being more reactionary than they would like.

Both Fiona and Grace (who held similar roles) expressed a sense of determination in helping staff through delivery of similar staff training at whole school and individual level. This highlighted accountability, the strategic role of the SENCo and the need for the class teacher to demonstrate what they have tried before raising the child with the SENCo [F1:8:12:9:5; F2:12:12-13:3; G1:6:12-7:1]. However, there were notable differences in understanding, with Fiona reporting that *"it is still quite low, maybe a 4[out of 10]"* [F2:13:3] while Grace reported *"A 10 – everyone gets it"* [G2:12:1-2]. The main difference between the settings' training was that Grace had included a focus on clear measurable objectives which she felt had supported the change in understanding [G1:8:7-11].

Isabel feels that promotion of an inclusive culture by the leadership team has aided better understanding of her role [I2:18:16-19:6]. However, she and others expanded on this noting that while the leadership team can be very supportive, they do not always understand the role as they have no experience of it [F1:1:9-12; I2:16:10-14] which they suggested can impact on how the SENCo is seen and what is expected of them [F1:21:9-13]. As headteacher during the second interview Fiona was using her SENCo experience within her new role [F2:20:10-12].



All participants in the study shared experiences of how parental understanding and expectations affect how the SENCO is perceived and the impact on supporting children with SEN. Parental understanding of the role based on experiences of working with the SENCO were expressed positively by 6 participants [C1:4:14; D1:10:4-6; E2:10:6-10; F1:12:3-6; G1:15:1; I1:15:2]. Claire shared that parental understanding of her predecessor's role [C1:1:12] and working in an independent setting [C1:5:1-2] "*prejudices*" [C1:1:12] the relationship. Lack of experience, changes to other wider education systems [D1:17:2-4] and lack of understanding in relation to support, placement or funding [D1:10:8-11], created barriers to the parent-SENCO relationship.

Emma and Fiona explained how changing their methods of communication with parents and holding 'SEN parent evenings' during the day had helped their role to be better understood, resulting in more collaborative relationships [E1:11:13-15]. Fiona further attributed this change to being a senior leader as parents perceive that "*because I am in a senior position that I have got more sway over something.*" [F1:12:2-8].

In contrast, Holly expressed frustration that parents ask to speak with her, rather than the class teacher [H1:16:9-14]. Interestingly, Isabel, Holly's Assistant SENCO, also shared that she is a first port of call but described this as an opportunity to decide whether to signpost the parent to another person, or to support within the department [I1:15:2-10]. Isabel explained that sometimes her relationship with parents was affected by prior conversations they had had with other staff about how she could help [I2:9:11-14].

David, Emma and Isabel expressed confidence that the children in their schools understand 'who' they are [E1:9:1-3], which they suggest had been aided by the fact that they are available to be spoken to [D1:12:7-11; I1:12:3-9]. Emma explained that to ensure the SENCO identity is better understood among children required "*more talking to the children about what it is that I do*" [E1:11:2-4].

Six participants shared experiences which demonstrated excellent shared understanding of the role with the Specialist Teaching Service and Educational Psychologists [D1:19:15; E1:6:5; G1:20:8-10] and good understanding by professionals such as occupational therapists and speech and language therapists [F2:13:8-11]. However, some also noted misperceptions such as the SENCO having "*time to devote to just that one child.*" [C2:11:16 – 12:2] or that they "*would be delivering all the speech programmes*" [F2:13:12]. Some participants expressed frustration that other agencies will want to speak with them rather than the class teacher [F1:14:5-11] or that reports will recommend additional funding or 1:1 support which is not within their remit [G2:12:9-15] and can ultimately have a detrimental impact on working relationships with parents.

Emma and Isabel considered that there is a link between an understanding of the role and recruitment and retention. Emma felt that staff still perceive that the SENCO will work with groups of pupils and that new teachers lack current understanding [E1:14:13-15:6]. During her second interview, Emma suggested that this should be addressed during teacher training adding *“it’s not just an easy option to be a SENCO.”* [E2:15:14], alluding to some feelings of tension between Emma and some of her colleagues.

Isabel felt that there is a link between professional identity and the ability to recruit or retain staff and that it is important for the SENCO to have a strong professional identity.

*“I think that if you are perceived of as someone who is in charge and knows what their job is and have a really strong professional identity then I think that yes, you also have a strong sense of making the senior leadership listen”* [I2:24:12-25:3]

#### 5.4.2 Trust

Within the 12 interviews, the concept of trust was implicit, and the word was only used explicitly three times, and yet it seems to be having a strong impact on the development of the participants' professional identities. Trust was expressed both in terms of being trusted by others and having trusting relationships with other people.

David and Isabel illustrated being trusted by pupils who described them as *“safe”* [D1:12:5] and someone who would provide support [D1: 12:6-11; I1:6:2-6; I1:12:2-11]. In contrast David's tone changed as he shared that in a large school, there are some pupils who *“see me as the person who is in charge of the kids who aren't so great at school”* [D1:15:13-14], suggesting that he would prefer it if more did understand his role and therefore feel able to seek support themselves if needed.

Trusting relationships within teams was very important for six participants who described how it supported practice through knowing that colleagues would do a good job [I2:15:1-2], small networks provided opportunity to share and know that there is *‘no such thing as a silly question’* [F1:19:14-15], outside agencies would work collaboratively [D1:14:7; E1:6:5-6; G1:20:8-10] and teaching teams would use advice and training to help the pupils [G1:6:15-16]. As their line-manager, Holly had entrusted her predecessors to fulfil the role and it was only after they left that she realised their weaknesses [H1:11:1-2] and highlighted her disappointment that trust had been misplaced.

Two participants spoke about the trust of parents, giving examples of how this meant that parents were *‘happy to come with their problems’* [C1:14:15] and to know that referrals would be followed up [G1:16:1]. Again, this considered how trust would impact on actions to support the children.

The greatest impact on the newly qualified SENCOs seemed to be the trust of the headteacher or Senior Leadership Team with notable comments from six participants on how this positively affected

their confidence and autonomy in the role. It was in this context that the word 'trust' was directly used by three participants [E2:7:11-14, F2:9:14-10:2, I1:10:12-15] who showed deep gratitude for this. At times, there was more nuanced use of the words, 'trust' and 'faith'. Fiona [F2:9:14-10:2] used these synonymously and commented how much she appreciated this while Isabel [I2:16:14-15] highlighted her trust in her line manager, but not faith in his ability to represent her views with the headteacher. Three participants felt trusted by the headteacher who believed they were capable of taking on the role on top of other responsibilities and making the right decisions [F1:7:12-14, G1:28:2, H1:1:15]. During the second interview, Claire spoke about the new headteacher showing an interest in SEN and listening to her opinions [C2:9:13-14]; while this did not go as far as saying that she felt trusted, it was more positive than the first interview.

Fiona [F2:11:13-12:4] and Isabel [I1:11:6-7] drew a clear distinction between the fact that their headteacher or line manager did not have the necessary knowledge and experience in SEN to 'support' them, but that they highly valued the trust placed in them. This was affirmed by other participants who used phrases such as having the 'back-up' [E2:5:11, E2:12:5] of the headteacher and in turn how staff could trust them (SENCo) [G2:9:14].

The concept of trust experienced by the participants was demonstrated through their relationships with different people. It was both consciously and unconsciously acknowledged but seemed to have a significant impact on their levels of confidence, contributing to how competent they perceived themselves to be.

### 5.4.3 Support

The importance and impact of support was expressed by every participant during the interviews. Their experiences may be summarised by Grace, who said that *'there is a nice knock-on effect of being supported'* [G2:18:8-9], which captures both the way in which they have appreciated support given to them and recognised how they support others.

Five participants spoke specifically about how much they valued the support received from the headteacher or wider leadership team. However, as noted previously, they made distinctions between practical support and more general encouragement and being valued [F2:11:13-12:4; I1:11:4-13], demonstrating how concepts of support and trust were intertwined. Claire, Emma and Grace drew particular attention to the fact that they could speak with the headteacher and other members of SLT whenever they needed to (C2:9:13-14; E2:7:11-14; E2:10:11-13; G1:28:2; G2:16:9-10) and other participants who described support to include the funding and time to attend training (G1:21:15-16; I1:10:12-16; I2:16:3-6). Grace was already part of the leadership team prior to

becoming SENCo, so it was interesting to see that she feels that the support of the leadership team “*makes it a bit easier*” [G2:9:16-10:1] and that without it “*you wouldn't have the respect of the teachers*” [G2:21:5-6].

David and Grace noted the support of their SEN governors who were described as “*really approachable, really supportive*” [D1:9:1-3], “*very robust*” [G1:19:5], making regular visits and using supportive questioning [D1:9:1-13] and encouraging participation on the SENCo course [G1:19:5-9]. While accepting that he will not always get what he needs, David believed that this governor “*fight's our corner*” [D1:9:8], along with a member of his team who is a teacher governor [D1:9:9]. Grace noted that actions taken to close the attainment gap since the school's previous OFSTED report, had resulted in the governors being “*happy with me and SEN*” [G1:19:12].

Colleagues within school were portrayed as a source of support for five of the newly qualified SENCo's who shared examples of working with pastoral colleagues (E2:10:13, G1:28:3), or, in larger schools an SEN team providing a collegiate approach [D1:15:5-7; H1:12:13-13:2; I2:14:11-15:7]. David, Emma and Isabel spoke of the practical support received from their predecessor or other experienced members of the team when they first started the role (D1:2:7; D1:5:6-11; E2:8:9-10; I2:16:9-11) and Holly commented that she did not know how SENCo's in smaller schools managed, particularly without access to administrative support [H1:13:9-10].

Beyond the school, all participants spoke of the support that they receive from external agencies and the local authority. They each highlighted how the support received had developed their own knowledge and understanding to support others in their setting.

Holly was proud about speaking at the annual LA SEN Conference [H1:5:15] and expressed the importance of being able to support others through sharing her experiences. Other participants spoke of more regular LA SENCo meetings and four showed a commitment to attend, highlighting usefulness for disseminating information, but no opportunity for networking or for seeking support pertinent to their needs [D1:2:13; E1:7:2; F2:14:3-8; G1:14:4-11; G2:14:5-12]. Isabel spoke of wanting to attend but finding that the timing often clashed with her teaching commitment [I2:20:5-10] and Claire (who works in an independent school) shared that she had ‘battled’ to make contact with the LA so that she could attend [C1:5:12-15; C2:12:7].

Table 6 illustrates how important smaller local networks had become to four of the participants. Within their discussions, they described these networks as a very strong collaborations where they could say or ask anything. Their comments showed that the networks provided them with support

that the group had identified as an area of need and provided contacts with whom individuals could liaise for further advice. The strength of feeling was highly evident.

Table 6: Importance of small networks

Participant	Evidence
David	D1:2:13-3:3
Emma	E1:7:2-6
Fiona	F1:19:8-20:8; F1:20:7; F1:20:10-21:4; F1:21:13-14; F2:11:7-9; F2:14:8-13; F2:15:15-16
Grace	G2:11:9-10; G2:14:5-12; G2:20:1-7

Further sources of support are the Specialist Teaching Service and Outreach Teams with four of the seven participants sharing positive experiences including professional collaboration [D1:13:4-8] and timely access to expertise to support their own development or provide knowledge to support others [D1:8:6-7; E1:6:5-13; E1:7:9-11; E2:5:11-13; E2:9:11-14; E2:11:2-6; F1:7:2; F2:13:8-10; G1:20:8-10; G1:22:12; G1:24:1-7; G2:12:7-9]. Having consistent support, with well-established relationships also came across as highly important, particularly at a time when many services are brought-in, adding a financial element to factors affecting support.

David, Fiona and Grace noted that there can be less supportive interactions with some outside agencies. Examples included meetings attended by professionals who dictate what the school should do [D1:14:2-6], mis-communication [F2:13:10-11] or failure to complete agreed actions such as writing a report [G1:20:13-16]. Grace recognised that, like schools, other services are stretched, commenting that support from some services is more challenging with long waiting lists, or referrals not being accepted, resulting in issues becoming “*more complex, deeper*” as they get older [G1:24:8-25:5] and as a SENCo feeling less supported than she feels should be the case [G1:25:13-14].

Isabel has found “*good support groups online*” [I2:18:13] while others commented on sources of support being further enhanced by the Local Offer produced by the Local Authority, which was useful for SENCos and parents [G2:20:1-7].

In addition to the support that they receive, most participants commented on the type of support that they give to others (Table 7). The changes that each person has made within their settings seems to have overwhelmingly resulted in more parents and staff seeking support and advice and impacting on participants professional identity.

Table 7: Evidence of support provided by participants

Staff seeking support	C1:4:1-4; D1:8:1-4; E2:6:5-8; E2:16:7-8; F1:6:7-13; F1:9:2-4; G1:5:12-13; G1:6:1-2; G1:29:11-3; G2:9:11-14; I1:14:12
Parents seeking support	C1:4:13-14; D1:10:2-11; F1:11:3-4; F1:13:7-15; G1:15:1; I1:15:3-5

The impact of the support given was exemplified by an experience shared by Fiona: she had revisited a concern by a parent that helped to identify the child's barrier to learning.

*"Mum came in here crying to me and said she knows me not as Mrs X but Mrs Y [a very positive adaption of her surname!] You can't say better than that!" [F1:13:13-15]*

Much of the support for students was expressed in terms of how SENCo's were supporting the other staff in the school. However, David and Isabel shared their perceptions of how students now feel more confident with their support [D1:12:7; I1:6:2-6].

The support given was well-received by all who experienced it with notable strength of feeling in relation to the support of the leadership team, specialist teaching service and the informal local networks. This was encapsulated by Isabel:

*"So, it is a very rewarding job [...], but, it very much depends as well on how you are supported within your school and the headteachers approach to SEN as well." [I1:22:6-10]*

#### 5.4.4 Isolation

Claire made several significant comments about how isolated she feels both within her current setting and from outside support. She noted that *"as an independent school we wouldn't get any LA help."* [C1:5:11-12] and therefore *"I feel the buck stops with me, in that I've got no-one to refer it on to"* [C1:6:5-6], *"Here it's just me"* [C1:8:11-12] and *"When left to your own devices and it's all down to you, [...] it's a bit scary."* [C2:11:2-3]. She spoke of *"battering away"* [C1:5:13] to contact the LA SEN team. Through attending LA meetings, she does now have a *"couple of contacts"* [C1:5:14-15]. Within these extracts, language such as *'the buck stops with me'* and *'battering away'* highlight the intensity of feeling that Claire has about working in isolation within a school of colleagues and with little wider network.

Other participants, who were all well-established in their settings and work within mainstream schools with access to local authority support also made both explicit [E1:6:15-16; F1:1:7-8; F1:21:6-7] and implicit comments about feelings of isolation including feeling *"a bit out on a limb"* [E1:7:8] and stating that *"unless you have done it, it is not possible to have any idea how busy it is, how varied it is"* [F2:20:15-21:1]. While sharing the role with Holly, Isabel expressed a lack of connection with other SENCo colleagues beyond school partly affected by the timing of meetings clashing with her commitment to examination classes [I2:20:4-16].

Like Claire, Emma demonstrated her pro-active nature in dealing with potential isolation sharing that she *"used to invite the SEN person in Medway, because you have like one key contact"* [E1:7:8-11].

Throughout her interviews, Grace acknowledged the collegiate approach in her own setting and as such did not comment on any feelings of isolation herself. However, when asked whether she feels that there is a link between professional identity and recruitment or retention, she indicated that it is more likely that lack of a supportive leadership team will have a greater impact as *“you wouldn't actually belong to a group for your own support, does that make sense? You would be on your own, that could affect retention.”* [G2:21:4-9]

#### **5.4.5 Other tensions**

Throughout both interviews, Fiona was generally very positive, and where she expressed challenge, it was mainly accompanied with a rationale or solution for it. However, there was almost a sense of dejection when she commented that *“It can be a thankless job a lot of the time, I think”* [F1:14:1] a phrase also used by Holly [H1:4:10-14].

Isabel, who was very optimistic and enthusiastic about her role highlighted some tension regarding working with some people from the local authority. To alleviate this, Isabel said that she *“would really like to know better how Local Authority works”* commenting that she has been *“baffled”* by some decisions, such as changing a social worker for a child with complex needs whilst the school are applying for an EHCP, noting that this is *“making it more difficult for everyone”* [I1:19:4-20:3].

### **5.5 Experience of sharing**

#### **5.5.1 Shared responsibility**

All participants spoke positively about their experience of shared responsibility. For some, working within a well-established team including an experienced SENCo at the outset of their journey was presented as important for both their knowledge development and establishing their own identity in an evolving role. David explained this as a *“strong mentor.”* [D1:5:11] while Isabel valued having a *“team that works really well together”* [I2:15:7]. At the beginning of her interview, Holly juxtaposed two positions – that of being ‘in charge’ of teams and how the teams interact to meet the needs of the pupils, including maximising the impact of the TA’, suggesting sharing of responsibility. [H1:2:4-14; H1:7:1-2; H1:9:9-10].

Emma described clear demarcations between the role of SENCo and other responsibilities in the school so that while *“we work closely together”* [E1:11:6], and *“We share lots of things and it does help.”* [E2:10:13], Emma stated that *“I don't do Pupil Premium, somebody else does that. Somebody else does EAL in this school.”* [E1:11:9-10]. Beyond the SEN department, David recognised that there



are colleagues who have complementary areas of expertise, *“who are monitoring progress and data in their role. I know I could go to them for assistance.”* [D1:17:15-16].

Looking at the wider school setting, three participants explicitly noted how shared responsibility (resulting from a clear principle of inclusion promoted by the leadership team) affects their experience. Isabel stressed the need for inclusion *“to be understood all round”* [I2:6:16] with *“Inclusion everywhere [...] it has to be a bit of a cultural change”* [I2:9:14-10:5].

With joint Deputy Head-SENCo roles, both Fiona and Grace illustrated shared responsibility through interactions with the headteacher [F2:9:5-8; G1:20:2-3] so that they can *“lighten”* [G2:16:9-10] the load.

Most participants reflected on changes in teachers taking more responsibility for learners with SEN over recent years. This has been achieved through training and giving teachers ideas of how to support pupils in class [E2:6:6-9; I1:14:3], sensitive sharing of information [I1:13:5-14] and through changing perceptions so that teachers *“now know that they are accountable.”* [F1:9:1-2]. Regular use of the pronoun ‘we’, indicated the team approach to supporting pupils in Grace’s setting [G1:3:1-2; G1:25:16-26:11]. In contrast, five participants described how some staff remain reluctant to accept their responsibilities for children with SEN [E2:6:4-5] or display *“resistance”* [I1:13:5]. For some, this resulted in a sense of frustration that despite SENCo support and the backing of national policies, a lack of engagement is evident *“when you talk to them, they haven’t really tried things, even basic things.”* [D1:8:12-13] and there needs to be *“negotiation”* [I1:14:7].

David and Grace described how their perception of shared responsibility varies both across services and within them. Use of powerful words such as *‘dictate’* [D1:14:1] show how David experiences a lack of autonomy when working with some people which contrasts with his positive experience of working with others who *‘have the same end goal’* [D1:14:7]. Occasionally Grace also alluded to some difficulties at pupil’s needs not being met when the help that they required went beyond the school’s expertise and was not always available [G1:25:10-14].

### 5.5.2 Shared interest or focus

Commenting that the school had a new headteacher who *“takes an interest in what I am doing, asks me my opinion on things and he listens to what I am saying”* [C2:9:13-15], Claire seemed much more positive during the second interview. The specific mention of this shared interest was singular but felt to be significant to Claire as it underpinned a change in her demeanour. Working within a collegiate approach with a shared focus was highlighted as important by all the other participants. Of particular importance was the sincerity of the relationship David shared with his link governor



who is *"genuinely interested in what we do"* [D1:9:10] and gets involved including speaking with the pupils.

The benefits of working with the Local Authority team have been discussed in various ways, but David also shared that these relationships were purposeful due to sharing *"the same sorts of interests in terms of what we want for the students."* [D1:13:11]. Imperative for David seems to be the focus on the pupils rather than a hierarchy within the services working in the team.

Emma and Fiona promoted the benefits gained through attending both formal and informal networks with people who share their focus on SEN. These groups have allowed them to feel well connected in the local area and provide opportunities to seek or provide support. Emma focused on being able to share best practice regarding interventions [E1:7:2-5; E2:11:2-6] while Fiona spoke about how the shared focus allowed her to be more confident to ask any questions [F1:19:14].

Grace is very clear that having a shared focus with the leadership team has been supportive as she believes *"that sets the tone for the school"* [G2:7:8-9] adding that *"there are no staff egos or anything, it's all about the children"* [G2:7:9-11].

### **5.5.3 Shared identity and experiences**

During their discussions all participants provided examples of how they have experienced shared identity or experiences with others.

Four participants highlighted shared identity and experiences with other local SENCOs. David suggested that he has more in common with colleagues in secondary schools than those at primary school because:

*"we have the same frustrations, the same concerns and the same experience and successes, and [...] you realise you're not just the only one with that identity and [...] the problems are the same."* [D1:2:13-3:3]

He also noted that where they liaise with the same outside agencies, *"we kind of have the same impression at times."* [D1:14:13-14].

Fiona and Grace also highlighted how their local SENCO groups helped develop their professional identity as a SENCO through being a source of significant support when they were new to role as everyone was *"in the same boat"* [F1:19:15]. They appreciated the opportunity to discuss, observe and work with colleagues in the same role noting that *"it gives you a bit more"* [G1:14:4-10], implying either confidence or knowledge. Reflecting on how the group are now supporting a new SENCO who was *"feeling utterly overwhelmed."* [F1:19:16-17], Fiona added that *"I think she would*

*have caved in, she would have actually caved in and given up if she didn't have a group of SENCOs who were supporting her"* [F1:19:16-20:8].

In addition, David, Fiona and Grace noted the benefit of *"actually talking about things"* [D1:5:13] with those from their course. David shared that some of these people had broadened his understanding as they were *"from other Boroughs as well, primary, secondary, I think there was someone from a special school as well and it was learning from their experiences."* [D1:7:8-10].

While acknowledging similarities in their identities and experiences, the participants also noted factors that affect these. Isabel explained that she shares some aspects of her identity with her team such as attributes, beliefs and values [I2:15:15-16] but it would be different as *"it's really personal"* [I2:7:12] and *"motives might be different, and the experience might be different"* [I2:15:11].

Personality [G2:6:2-8; G2:6:12-13] and personal experiences [E2:16:4-12] were deemed to have the biggest impact on identity by some, with Claire noting that:

*"we are all different people, so we are coming at it with different baggage, different strengths, different weaknesses."* [C2:7:10-11]

Context such as demographics, level of parental support and life experiences [E2:5:1-5] were also considered to impact on the ability for SENCOs to share identity and experiences.

This was deemed to be further compounded by the range of roles which SENCOs often hold, as David commented that *"it's not one identity, it's more fractured."* [D1:2:3-4]. All participants added weight to this through selecting several job titles to describe their role acknowledging they had *"lots of different roles"* [G1:28:16] or *"hats"* [G2:5:5]. Fiona was unsure whether there is a *"clear professional identity"* [F1:1:3] as she thinks that *"those of us who have senior leadership roles work very differently."* [F1:2:6]. She was bemused recounting one NASC session which demonstrated the disparity in roles, with several people commenting on spending large amounts of time working with pupils and *"It was a real shock to some of them."* [F1:3:1] when they were told that this was not part of the role and that it was strategic.

As newly qualified SENCOs, this disparity in identities and experiences, resulted in several participants commenting on how this affected the usefulness of large LA led meetings. Fiona spoke about having to *"listen to the jargon and go aargh!!! [...] You panic, panic"* [F1:19:10-12] and *"felt like a rabbit in the headlights"* [F2:14:4]. This was contrasted with the smaller, local group in which someone would *"explain everything again, lots of opportunity to ask questions in a different way"* [F2:14:13-14]. This was also Grace's experience, noting that *"we don't get chance to network at those meetings"* and adding that it would be useful to break into smaller groups as *"they might have*

*other really good resources that we could use [...] We need more time to network. It's powerful."*  
[G2:14:7-15:6].

Most felt that it should be possible to create a generic identity for a SENCo even if this is a starting point that "the school can adapt" [C2:7:14] to reflect the different tasks or responsibilities that may be required. Several times Isabel commented on the need for a generic identity and saw it as functional because "*the less experienced you are the less confident you are* [I2:8:2]. She was clear that it should set out the "*expectation of a SENCo*" [I2:9:3] but recognised that how the role is done could be adapted. She explained that a clear shared identity was important because:

*"we have to belong somewhere to give us meaning, so some type of identity initially is good, you know, to be settled."* [I2:22:8-10]

Claire and Fiona held similar views, with both noting that if they moved school, their identity would be the same, but what they do might be different [C2:8:9-10; F2:6:13].

Holly has a clear understanding of her own identity but did not demonstrate an experience of sharing this with any colleagues. She stated "*my professional identity is very much as, I have been the Assistant Headteacher here since 2002*" [H1:2:15-16] and that "*I don't call myself a SENCo at all, because, this sounds awful, but in my head, I am senior to a SENCo, because I line managed the SENCo's for years here, but it was only part of my leadership role.*" [H1:1:4-7].

## **5.6 Identification of their attributes as a SENCo**

Through both direct questions and other comments made during the interviews, the participants expressed the attributes that they considered most important in aiding them with the role of SENCo and as a result contributing to their professional identity.

### **5.6.1 Strategic leadership skills**

Both David and Emma identified themselves as part of the middle leadership team and as having line management responsibilities [D1:1:6-9; D1:15:3-4; E1:1:14-2:1]. David spoke about looking strategically "*at the whole cohort*" and "*combinations of children*" [D1:11:2-5] when considering intervention, concluding "*Fortunately, the final decision on that is not mine.*" [D1:11:9-10]. These suggested that while he enjoys the strategic nature of the role, sometimes he finds being part of middle leadership rather than senior leadership has its advantages. In contrast, prior to taking on her current role, Emma had been literacy co-ordinator and a member of SLT. While no longer a member of the SLT, she noted that she does "*attend most of the meetings*" [E1:1:9-10].

Fiona, Grace and Holly were all on their school's senior leadership team and this position and associated strategic leadership skills were evidently important to them. Fiona openly stated that *"those of us who have senior leadership roles work very differently."* [F1:2:5] and *"I like being strategic anyway."* [F2:4:9-10]. Fiona spoke with NASC peers who were not on the leadership team who found the strategic role *"a real shock"* [F1:3:1] and that as a result, some who had been in post a while *"struggled the most"* [F2:7:6]. Grace noted that *"not being on the leadership team."* [G2:9:3-4] would challenge her professional identity. Throughout her interview, Holly referred to her leadership status as important asserting that *"Teaching is hierarchical in its management structure and in its responsibility structure."* [H1:1:3-4].

They highlighted the need for the SENCo to be part of the leadership team to support change management [F1:12:3-6; F2:8:12-9:2] and make it *"easier to champion things in your own school and to get systems in place"* [G1:30:1-3]. Grace phrased a similar view due to the *"respect"* [G1:10:15; G1:18:7] that is usually garnered through the position, although added that this had to be earned. Grace also noted that if you need to *"encourage"* or *"challenge"* teachers, she could not see how this would be possible if you are *"at a lower level than them"* [G2:8:6-7] and that being on the leadership team added to *"your professionalism [...] taking responsibility, being a role model"* [G2:9:11-10:1]. From a different point of view, Grace added that if you are taking on responsibility or accountability associated with the role *"you also need to get that recognition that you are a leader."* [G2:8:15].

Isabel did not identify as being part of SLT or middle leadership but contrasted being a head of department (her previous role), to taking on the role of Assistant SENCo with the latter requiring greater strategic skills due to whole-school responsibilities [I1:13:1-4].

Many of the participants recognised the shift to a more strategic role and shared many experiences that had utilised strategic leadership skills rather than carrying out operational duties. These included developing whole-school systems for early-identification of need and support, and increased focus on responsibility and accountability of class teachers using vocabulary such as monitoring, training and empowering both explicitly and implicitly (Table 8). Through a combination of the three, Grace in particular felt that she was helping to drive up standards across the school as well as have a positive impact on the staff personally.

Table 8: Strategic vocabulary

Monitoring	E1:2:7-9; F1:9:10-14; F1:10:5-6; F1:17:3-8; G1:1:5-7; G1:2:11-15; G1:3:15-4:4; I1:6:12-7:6
Training	E2:7:14-8:1; F1:11:7; G1:6:5-12; G1:10:3-11; H1:7:2-4; H1:14:3-7; I1:14:12-13
Empowering	F1:12:14-16; F1:10:16-11:14; G1:5:2-6; G1:6:14-7:4; G1:8:4-9; G1:8:14-16; G1:11:14- 12:16

David, Fiona, Grace and Holly all mentioned line-managing staff, mostly in relation to providing training or performance management. However, they also shared how strategically they sometimes had to *“be very strict”* [H1:15:7] to ensure that staff are able to prioritise tasks and not be distracted by reactionary situations, including being *“quite firm”* [H1:16:2] that tasks should be completed at work and not at home.

Strategic skills were also shown through an awareness of financial efficiency and making the best use of resources at individual and whole school level. Emma explained that they are now using resources that existed in school rather than buying in someone to do dyslexia tests [E1:12:9-13; E2:11:14-12:2] and Grace shared examples of how expertise from visiting specialists is communicated to school staff who are regularly supporting the pupil [G1:9:4-7]. For Grace, this also included awareness of her own role as *“in terms of cost effectiveness...it does make sense, because to be a non-teaching deputy is quite a luxury”* [G1:1:11-12].

Being part of the management team has not been without challenges for Emma although she seems to have grasped these, driven by her focus on positive outcomes for the pupils. She described how it had affected her relationship with colleagues and that she sometimes feels *“divided between being friends and being a professional ...but I’m not scared to have those conversations that could be a little bit awkward, you know.”* [E1:5:7-6:2]. The language in some other examples of Holly’s leadership style were perhaps less positive and were linked to her view of the hierarchy of leadership as she shared that *“people are quite scared of me, it makes that easier.”* [H1:4:7] and that she considers herself to *“have a lot of power”* [H1:9:1] although noted that the word *“Perhaps autonomy is a better word”* [H1:9:2].

### **5.6.2 Emotional Intelligence**

All participants either stated the need for emotional intelligence or exemplified this as an attribute through their discussions. In each case this was driven by a concern for the welfare of either pupils, parents, or colleagues.

David often paused slightly before responding during the interview, and his comments suggest that he is a thoughtful person, who, while clearly focused on the needs of those that he supports, seems to be level-headed and calm. Some examples shared during the interview, such as his experience of challenging discussions with parents, line-managing a large team and confronting the Headteacher about the SEN budget suggest that David works pragmatically, basing decisions or opinions on facts that he has gathered and understanding the emotions in a room to negotiate a way towards a solution, with the needs of the pupil at the centre of what he does.

Emma outlined how she feels able to empathise and understand how parents are feeling due to her own personal experience and she has *“been on the other side of it as a parent”* [E1:3:12-16] and stated that *“I don’t want to be that SENCo who is not helping.”* [E1:3:14-4:2]. While not sharing the same personal experience, Fiona recognised that *“you have to be patient, you have to be a good listener”* [F2:3:16], and Grace and Isabel used the concept of ‘empathy’ for parents, staff and pupils [G1:28:15-15; G1:29:2-5; I2:5:4-5] and being ‘mindful’ of others [I1:13:5-10]. For Isabel, this also included having an understanding that students *“need to understand things, but they are not developed emotionally”* [I2:4:4-5].

Rather than just basing practice on experience, Emma also raised the importance of being *“self-critical”* [E2:3:4] and taking time to think. Similarly, Fiona noted that *“being reflective is important”* [F2:5:10] in many areas of the role. Several times Isabel described how this underpins what she does through taking time *“to question your beliefs, your experiences”* [I1:2:10], to *“take risks [...] not be afraid to change and to change your mind after. And admit if things are not working.”* [I2:5:6-7] or questioning *“knee jerk reactions. [...] then it forces you to stop and say OK, let’s leave it a moment and then come back to it and find other ways.”* [I2:21:5-9].

Four participants recognised that the role has both positive and negative impacts on their emotions. This seems to have been felt more strongly by Fiona and Grace than they expected as they describe it as *“very intense [...] actually been quite draining”* [G1:12:14-17] and likening it to parents *“going through a grieving process”* [F2:15:3-7]. These participants each indicated that they needed to take time to consider what the next move should be, accessing support with colleagues in school if needed. Emma and Grace both shared information with the pastoral manager, home-school worker or headteacher [E2:10:13-16; G1:28:3-6] and for Grace it has included recognising *“what I can do, and I can’t do anything about that, but focus on the things that I can do”* [G1:27:9]. Grace added that she thinks needing to manage the emotional side of things is part of her wider leadership role, not just because she is the SENCo but said:

*“I think there is something about professionalism and if you are in a professional role, you learn to deal with it better. I don’t know why, I don’t know if it’s because it’s part of the training or you have that professional identity, that persona, but here we will talk to each other and make sure that when you go home, you are not carrying it around with you.”*  
[G2:16:3-17:2]

While others focused on the need to off-load challenging emotions, Holly was keen to explain that although she and Isabel *“can quite appear quite hard”* they are just being *“very pragmatic, and I think you have to be pragmatic. You can’t get emotional.”* [H1:13:4-7].

Thinking differently, Isabel made a link between having a clear professional identity and being settled emotionally because *"If you are not [...] you cannot look after the students or families."* [I2:22:10-12].

### 5.6.3 Communication skills

There were four main themes to the participant's comments regarding communication: availability, careful listening, sensitivity, and consideration of the audience. Some also highlighted being able to mediate between parents and staff or other agencies and the confidence to be direct when needed. Communications skills were deemed to underpin productive and supportive relationships, particularly with parents.

Words or phrases relating to being 'approachable' [E1:4:8; E1:9:16; G1:15:3], 'accessible' [E1:4:5] and 'available' [G2:4:12-15] regularly appeared in the dialogue and seemed to be the most important features of effective communication skills along with timely responses [G1:15:8-11; G2:4:12-15]. Emma explained that she needs to be *"the go between [...] the parent and the teacher [...] especially if the relationship has broken down or if I can build a bridge between the two to bring them together."* [E1:4:11-13].

The word 'communication' was readily broken down to show that the participants recognised the need to listen and not just provide information [I1:13:16-14:6]. Listening was portrayed to mean allowing someone the opportunity to share their feelings, to have their contribution valued and being a two-way process [G1:15:14-16; G2:3:15-16; I1:22:15-23:4]. Fiona shared a powerful example of listening when a concerned parent revisited her, resulting in Fiona reassessing the child's needs. Rather than confirming what the parent had said, Fiona identified a different issue, and the child was referred to a specialist who confirmed the need [F1:13:13-14]. In addition to listening, Grace recognised that written reports may be hard to understand and therefore takes responsibility for helping to communicate the content with parents [G1:24:5-7].

The concepts of sensitivity and confidence were entwined within some discussions and examples highlighted that at the root of the discussion was a desire to improve a situation. Emma spoke of being *"confident if you're having a difficult conversation sometimes [...] you've got to be persuasive"* [E1:9:15-10:1] while Fiona expressed a need for *"a little bit of bravery"* when delivering *"tough messages"* [F2:6:2-7] or needing to communicate *"very gently"* [F1:5:13] in some cases.

Claire, Emma and Grace also gave examples of how they had proactively developed relationships with external agencies which in turn have opened avenues of communication when seeking advice or support [E1:6:10-13].



Participants referred to the need for careful consideration of who the audience is to ensure appropriate language is used [G2:18:4; I1:2:4-6], the volume is considered [G1:19:2; I1:13:6-7; I2:9:10], and that communication is purposeful [G2:18:8-9; I1:13:12-14; I2:9:12-13].

While seen as vital to developing effective relationships, participants identified that at times, communication can be challenging. David described scenarios where parents have been to see him with queries or dissatisfaction about provision for their child and he has needed to enable productive communication to maintain focus on supporting the pupil within any restrictions of budget or other logistics. Grace recognised that at times it can be her position as Deputy Head that affects how comfortable parents are about speaking with her; at such times, she has found that working with the home-school support worker is effective noting that *"it doesn't bother me, as long as they are in and talking"* [G1:16:14].

Having recognised some factors that can impede communication, Grace's setting decided to improve staff understanding about how to speak with parents, resulting in coaching and mentoring for teachers sharing that *"we practise conversations"* [G1:5:12-14].

The need to be an advocate is another area of communication which Isabel sees as important both to other people *"to ensure that [...] the children with SEN's voices are heard at different places around the school, [...] and parents as well."* [I1:7:3-7] and to enable students to make decisions for themselves.

#### 5.4.4 Operational skills

While identifying with the strategic and leadership aspects of the role, four participants also discussed operational duties. Commenting that *"there is too much paperwork"* [F2:23:2] or that it *"is really heavy"* [G1:28:11], participants recognised the necessity for it with Grace noting that it *"is fine because to me that's logical"* [G1:27:12] and it is important to be *"efficient, [...] really organised and clear with your paper trail, because ultimately, to support any child, you have got to have a trail of evidence."* [G1:28:11-15]. To aid this Fiona streamlined the paperwork through systematic changes to processes that she used in school so that now everything is in one electronic document. She recognised that:

*"if you've got all your systems in place, then actually it can be quite quick. You've just got to get your systems in place first. [...] Keep all your files where they should be, then you're just typing up what's in front of you and it shouldn't be that hard."* [F2:23:2-10]

Through reflecting on the SENCOs that she had line-managed, Holly identified managing paperwork efficiently as one of the most important operational skills to provide the support a pupil needs [H1:8:4-8; H1:11:1-13].



Grace highlighted the importance of reliability, exemplified through the need for prompt responses [G1:10:16], the ability to seek or 'chase' information [G1:15:3-14; G1:20:3-5] and being able to signpost people [G1:23:4-14]. Fiona also commented on the need to be computer literate and have good time management skills.

During both interviews, Isabel held the position of Assistant SENCo with Holly as the SENCo. This meant that much of what Isabel referred to within her role was operational: speaking with pupils, their parents, supporting teachers when an incident occurred etc. Key operational skills mentioned by Isabel included the need to be *"organised, you know being organised and delegating – very important to delegate."* [I2:5:7-8].

### 5.6.5 Demeanour

All participants commented on their own demeanour and these behaviours were also evident through other examples that were shared.

During her interviews, Claire made few comments regarding her strategic leadership skills or about her communication or operational skills. She primarily identified her attributes in relation to her emotional intelligence, demeanour, and faith, including being patient, listening, tenacious, caring, and having energy. Her concern or care for others was clear as she expressed a desire for *"everyone to have a happy and fulfilled life"* [C2:5:11] and a wish to *"include them and do my best for them."* [C2:6:14].

In both interviews, Claire expressed how she is persistent or *"tenacious"* [C2:6:5] in her endeavours to support children, sometimes struggling to find exactly the word that she was looking for, which affected my own ability to understand exactly what she was experiencing. Her descriptions included:

*"being able to stand up for what you want to do and not being put off by other people and just accepting that. You need to be a little bit stubborn."* [C1:7:12-13]

Related to these ideas was having a positive work ethic with Grace noting that *"You have got to like hard work."* [G1:28:10] and Holly sharing how her whole team works *"flat out"* [H1:5:5-7], *"they're not clock watchers"* [H1:14:12-16] and describing Isabel as:

*"an absolute powerhouse of energy and determination and creativity and she is very clever and has got such stamina."* [H1:14:9-10]

Flexibility was highlighted by most participants, for example when Fiona [F1:5:1-5], Grace [G1:1:4-10] and Holly [H1:1:16-2:2] accepted the additional responsibility of SENCo when the previous incumbent retired, went on maternity leave or left for a new role. While not something that was planned, Fiona and Grace recognised the benefit of the dual role with Grace adding *"It wasn't something that I chose to do [sounds a little hesitant], but [change of tone], I love it!"* [G2:11:13-14].

David demonstrated the need for flexibility to work with and lead a large body of staff. Being flexible and open-minded were characteristics that repeated themselves throughout Isabel's interviews [I1:2:6-10; I1:1:13-15; I1:22:10-11; I2:5:2-7].

Isabel also demonstrated positivity for the role in abundance noting that *"A lot of it can be very challenging, but I love it. I love the job."* [I1:10:8-9], *"it's much richer than I thought."* [I1:20:10-11] and is *"a very rewarding job"* [I1:22:6].

Throughout the interviews, participants demonstrated interest in and passion for teaching children with SEN. David referred to himself as *"specialising in SEN"* [D1:1:6], promoting the *"need to go back to quality first teaching...It's about the child."* [D1:8:9-12] and *"looking at what's best overall for these students"* [D1:13:8-9]. He spoke fondly of those he is supporting, often using the word *"kids"* and being proud that one of them referred to him as *"safe"*. When considering whether they would recommend the role to others, Claire and David both expressed the need for an interest in SEN [C1:7:10; D1:18:7-9]. Others used the words *passion* or *passionate* as a key attribute for success as a SENCo [G1:3:12; G1:10:14-15; H1:8:11-16; I1:17:9]. While passionate about the role himself, David added an element of caution, recognising the strength and perseverance required, noting that *"if people are genuinely keen and I can see that desire, I would tell them the realities of it."* [D1:18:12-19:1]. Similarly, while noting the challenges of the role while completing the NASC, Emma said she would recommend the role of SENCo to someone else, giving an emphatic 'yes' [E1:9:6-7; E2:16:1-5] when asked if she intended to remain in role. Both these discussions suggest that the participants wanted to be clear about the reality of the role.

Having a confident demeanour was both expressed and exhibited by most participants. Emma shared a need for confidence in communicating with outside agencies and the Headteacher and demonstrated that she is solution-focused and proactive [E1:7:8-11; E1:10:6-10]. Fiona made links between how strong professional identity is, recruitment and retention, and confidence levels stating that without this *"you're not going to do your best."* [F2:19:14-20:2]. Throughout the interview, Holly cited many examples of how she is confident to challenge other senior staff or the local authority about finances [H1:4:14-5:1; H1:5:11-12], to manage staff and be competent in dealing with *"difficult situations"* [H1:12:9], and to speak at the local authority annual SEN conference [H1:5:15].

Other attributes on the word webs included: practical; organised; self-critical; reflective on practice; being able to work to a deadline [Emma]; patient, reflective, champion, commitment, positivity and bravery [Fiona]; professional, non-judgemental [Grace]; reflect/ take risks [Isabel]. In addition to noting these words on the word webs, participants had either spoken explicitly about these ideas or

inferred them during the interviews. There were also examples of modesty and being reserved personalities such as: *"I don't like to say this, but..."* [G1:10:15] and *"You do begin to doubt yourself. Teachers are naturally reserved, and we don't go and show off"* [G1:21:3-4].

### 5.6.6 Beliefs and values

During the discussions, it was clear that distinguishing between beliefs, values and motivations was challenging for some and therefore the similarities and differences across these concepts have been compared.

The concept of inclusion was evident through direct use of the term [E1:11:6; I2:6:14] and implied throughout discussions with all participants. It was considered in two ways. Firstly, the rights of the child to have an education [C2:1:5] and make progress in school [Emma and Grace's word web; G2:3:12; I2:5:8-9] and holistically through *"wider opportunities, not just academic"* [C2:5:2-4]

*"everybody has a right to be happy and to be fulfilled and to just have, you know the human kind of things you want for kids really."* [I2:5:8-12]

Isabel's focus is constantly on supporting pupils to *"be the best person they can be"* [I2:6:2] adding:

*"when I have struggled with some of the students, I think about what would I want if it was my child... And then you see them differently. [...] It's not up to me to decide what it is, [...] Whatever their path as long as they can look after themselves."* [I2:5:12-6:4]

Some participants focused on 'meeting the needs' [Emma's word web; G1:29:10; G2:5:8], recognising that *"everyone has potential"* [F2:3:5] and that there is a need to focus on *"building up children's self-esteem, making them feel valued, making them feel that they're not miles behind everyone else"* [F1:1:18:5]. Words such as 'fairness' [G2:3:12] and 'compassion' from Grace's word web underpin the sentiments expressed by other participants.

Some participants inferred a similar meaning but focused on ensuring that a *'child's barriers [are] being addressed.'* [Grace word web; G2:3:16], helping identify *"needs that haven't been uncovered yet and that are the priority"* [I1:3:11] and being a *"champion"* [F2:4:1; F2:4:4] for those with SEN with Fiona noting that:

*"A lot of my motivation was looking at the little child and thinking nobody was fighting for them, so I will be here to guide them"* [F2:4:5-6]

Emma, Fiona and Grace all commented on their values or motivations including supporting teachers to support children with SEN [Emma word web; G1:29:11-13; G2:5:6] through listening to pupils and *"what they feel they need to change"* [G2:18:6-8], as *"those small tweaks, small changes that you can make to children's experiences make a world of difference"* [F1:17:12-13]. Isabel noted the importance of not having a temporary fix just *"for that lesson, it's modelling as well, helping them to always become better person"* [I1:18:7-8]. Fiona asserted that she has a:

*“real firm belief that we need to change the way we teach, not let children with needs down. I think that’s something that teachers who don’t have that background struggle with.”* [F2:3:5-8]

Many of these discussions highlighted the child-centred approaches adopted by participants which Isabel believes help them in *“becoming a better person or a happy person. Not in the happy sense that they will smile all the time, but healthy, in a healthy way”* [I1:3:8-9]. Similarly, David’s moral compass clearly underpins his practice, with him concluding that *“it’s about giving them a chance”* [D1:12:2]. He valued being called ‘safe’ by a pupil who had recently been excluded and was not judgemental about their behaviour. Through her child-centred view of inclusion, Emma demonstrated a holistic awareness of the range of demographics that represent the pupils at her school [E2:4:6-5:5].

In addition to the children’s rights, participants expressed beliefs and values in relation to parental rights to support [C2:5:1-6] ensuring that ‘parents feel heard.’ [Emma word web] and can see that their child is being supported [G2:18:8].

Considering how their beliefs, values and motivations relate to their role as SENCo, Isabel shared that it is *“A new challenge, a challenge. The pressure, I find a lot of value in it, and it links with my belief.”* [I2:7:8-9] and Fiona shared that she has had *“21 years in the job and I still get a lot from that!”* [F1:18:10].

During our discussions, Claire and Fiona intertwined use of the words beliefs and values with faith, finding it hard to separate them. When trying to explain what underpins their demeanour or the way that they act, they both returned to the word ‘faith’ on several occasions. Claire shared that her faith is *“probably at the base of it and everything else comes out of that.”* [C2:3:11-12], that *“the way that I see people is based on my faith.”* [C2:5:5] and much of what she does she *“would put it down to my Christian faith”* [C2:6:1]. There were other occasions when Claire referred to ‘faith’, yet despite its importance to her, she sought affirmation that she could state this saying, *“Can I put that?”* [C2:5:6].

Similarly, when looking at ‘values’ on the word web, Fiona said, *“All I can think of is Christian values at the moment”* [F2:4:2]; she also wrote the words love and honesty. We later returned to the phrase Christian values, and I asked what she felt it meant, she replied:

*“I think that love comes before everything, you’ve got to have that, for the children, for the families most definitely. Knowing people, children and staff. That’s really important.”* [F2:5:10-6:1]

In contrast to Claire and Fiona, when Isabel encountered the word ‘values’ on the word web, she became more cautious about what to write.

*"[Big pause] I find it difficult with values because when I grew up, I was brought up with Catholic religion, so a lot of values were linked with that, which I don't mind because I think they are good, but they were imposed."* [I2:6:3-5]

After consideration, Isabel shared that although the word values can be interpreted differently by different people, she is now clear that her values are inclusive and perceives her role to be part of something bigger which adds to her own investment in the role as she has:

*"found a lot of personal meaning in it. It's not just a job. It is also something that is part of helping new generations, you know, being good contributors to society, [...] it can have a lot of implications in the local community and the world really"* [I1:18:4-14]

## 5.7 The importance of knowledge

All participants contributed to each of the following sub-themes recognising the benefits of different types of knowledge and how their experiences had been enhanced through it or impeded by a lack of it.

### 5.7.1 Knowledge gained through experience

The concept of experience was discussed by participants both positively and negatively.

Lack of experience negatively impacted levels of confidence due to feeling unable *"to make the call on certain decisions"* [C1:6:11] and the fact that initially they *"didn't have any background"* [F2:10:5]. This added further challenge for Fiona when teachers approached her with problems to solve, and she needed to say, *"I don't know...and as Deputy Head, I had to say to them I don't know."* [F2:10:8-11] indicating concern about how any perceived weakness in terms of her knowledge of SEN would undermine her role as Deputy Head.

More experienced participants projected greater confidence, linking this to what they have had to attend to. Similarly, all participants exuded more confidence during the second interview which they related to having *"more experience of dealing with things that I find harder [...] knowing that I was right"* [C2:8:13-9:6] and having *"learnt a lot over the years"* [D1:5:2], which Claire said *"boosts your confidence and your identity in dealing with the next situation"* [C2:16:2]. In supporting her successor to the role of SENCo, Fiona recognised the experience gained during her time as SENCo and the progress that she had made personally and the impact this had on school systems [F2:19:5-7]. David also expounded the benefits of experiences through discussion about supporting colleagues with an interest in SEN into the role [D1:18:11; D1:19:1-2], highlighting his view that developing experience before taking on the role of SENCo is an enabler to someone's success in the role.

Reflecting on their identity as SENCOs, most felt that this had become much stronger with Fiona noting it was *“quite high actually”* [F2:9:10-11]. She attributed this to knowing *“what my role was, I had created what I had to create and knew what everyone should do.”* [F2:11-12]. Isabel also explained how increased experience had enabled her to do the role more effectively sharing that *“it looks crazy when you start but gradually you do it automatically.”* [I2:8:6-7] and how experience has made her *“more confident sometimes to deal with things. [...and] also the speed at which I can decide [...and] the easier it is to make a decision.”* [I2:12:8-11]. Isabel recognised that her experience is now helping her to support teachers as she is more aware of the whole school and longer-term *“bigger pictures”* [I1:10:3] without needing to *“break it to different parts”* [I2:13:4-7] so that her interactions are *“more natural [and] more knowledgeable”* [I2:13:13-14]. Isabel also shared the impact of experience on her personally [I1:9:13-15] and on her understanding as a teacher [I1:23:10-12]. Furthermore, she described how the experience had been both challenging and motivating as she had found her interest in the role had increased [I2:14:1-7].

The experience to which the participants referred, had several sources. Claire and Emma both commented on their personal experiences and how this contributed to them becoming a SENCO [C2:4:4; E1:3:15-16]. They spoke of how they have *“experienced the system”* [E2:4:2-3] and their *“own experience of helping them [her children] and then on top of that, it’s the experience I’ve had since...It’s like a rollercoaster, isn’t it?”* [C2:4:4-10].

Building on this and her experience as a teacher, Claire suggested that SENCOs need more knowledge, *“So they’re not just seen as being a teacher”* [C2:14:9], implying that the role of SENCO builds on their previous role but now comprises something additional. All participants spoke of the necessity of having teaching experience with five participants specifically noting how their significant practical experience had aided them to support other staff with teaching and learning strategies [D1:3:13-14; E1:1:6-8; E2:15:1-3; G1:4:10-15; G1:6:2-4; H1:13:10-13; I1:4:7].

Having taken on leadership and management responsibilities, Grace was left with some concern about how her experience would change and impact on the role and the importance of remembering *“what the actual pressures are like in the classroom”* [G2:10:7]. Similarly, Isabel commented on the need to continue with some teaching *“because it is so dynamic the job, that you start to lose it, what it means day to day, you know, to try to implement something* [I1:8:5-7].

While Holly valued her teaching experience, she also added a precautionary note saying,

*“it is a very different role to teaching, and schools that make people do a lot of teaching, again, that is fine if you have got the admin support, but you do need admin support, or not to teach.”* [H1:13:8-10]

Several participants spoke of their experience of the NASC course with the most mentioned benefit being that of speaking with other people about their experiences. Additionally, David recognised the value of being able to interrogate a particular concept (e.g. SEN funding) through time to *“actually think about it”* [D1:5:15] and *“to reflect on different things”* [D1:7:2-3]; he found this experience empowering [D1:6:15-16]. Emma also reflected on how the experience had improved her *“knowledge about the practices within [Local Authority]. [...] what the new curriculum says about SEN and the Code of Practice”* [E1:2:16-3:2] and now feels that she has a better understanding of how these things have evolved.

Some participants reflected on the benefit of their experiences in other whole-school or leadership roles prior to becoming the SENCo, such as Emma's experience as literacy co-ordinator and Fiona and Grace's roles as deputy head. Grace explained that leadership experience was needed *“to deal with those challenging conversations, [...] that experience to answer questions under pressure.”* [G2:18:13-16]. In addition to teaching and leadership experience, Fiona shared that she had been working in the same school for just over 20 years ago resulting in considerable experience and knowledge of the school and the community which she uses in her role as SENCo. Experiences that supported Holly with the role of SENCo included line-managing her predecessors [H1:3:14-4:2] and the way that SEN fits with the wider team that she manages.

Showing the importance of teaching and leadership experience, Fiona expressed concerns that, although her successor had worked part-time in the school, she *“had no experience of senior leadership, [...] was a part-time [PPA] teacher in the school already but had no background in this [SEN] at all [...] she didn't even have a class responsibility.”* [F2:18:6-11].

### **5.7.2 Knowledge gained through induction**

Experiences of induction were expressed broadly as either non-existent or very good.

Five participants shared that they had not received formal induction into the role. Claire expressed quite bluntly that it was not good [C2:10:8] while Fiona laughed, sharing that she *“didn't have one!”* although added that she *“started the year the new Code of Practice came in, so there was training aplenty on the new Code of Practice”* [F2:12:6-8]. Grace stated that rather than formal induction, it evolved due to taking on the role following maternity cover and was *“Probably not that effective, [...] probably about 6 [out of 10]”* [G2:11:4]. She explained how the role was impacted by her using different systems and having different relationships with parents, but she identified and attended training quite quickly herself before going on the NASC course [G2:11:4-14]. Isabel perceived that she had not received a good induction into the role [I2:18:7], suggesting that this was due to the



speed at which she was appointed, however, with her positive outlook, she reflected that this may have been useful as she thought for herself rather than picking up existing systems and she was joining an established team [I2:18:3-14].

The most positive descriptions of induction were when incumbent SENCos were able to shadow or work alongside an experienced colleague prior to appointment. Claire shared that in her previous setting she *"was working with the SENCo, so I could watch and learn... that was good training."* [C2:10:15-16]. David also described how *"prior to taking on this role I spent a fair bit of time with the SENCo who outlined things as they were at that stage... that was, you know, a really good intro into the role"* [D1:5:6-8] and during his first two years, the Assistant SENCo was a *"strong mentor"* for him [D1:5:11].

Emma had a very positive experience of induction to the role. She was given time and paid additional hours to smooth her transition, which was clearly appreciated. Her induction included getting *"booked on the SENCo course quite quickly, I had lots of different training – I met with another SENCo to talk about the role, and I also met with our other existing SENCo."* [E2:8:4-17].

In contrast to her own experience, Fiona described spending a lot of time with her successor (also an internal appointment) to explain the role:

*"she came into me [...] with a blank notepad and asked help before you go. So, I met with her a lot, a lot, over that time [...] and I think that the conversations that I had with her, I kept saying, oh, and I do this ... and I do this as well"* [F2:18:14-19:1]

Fiona also ensured that the new SENCo had contact with the local collaboration that she had found so useful noting *"they're really strong as a group and [new SENCo] is very lucky to have them. I am confident that they will look after her."* [F2:15:15-16].

### 5.7.3 Knowledge gained through training

The concept of training was portrayed in two ways by participants: most spoke about the opportunity to discuss concerns or queries within their local networks, and some had attended more formal training run by their local outreach teams.

Participants implied that they found it easy to work with others in their informal local network, and that they found sharing knowledge locally highly valuable [D1:2:13-3:3; D1:14:13; E2:11:2-5; F1:9:15; F2:14:13; G1:21:10-23:1]

The only training that Holly referred to, was the introduction to the Code of Practice that was delivered to everyone in the school by the previous SENCo before she left which she said made her feel *"very familiar with it"* [H1:7:10-14].



In addition to the networks of local SENCo's, participants shared examples of using their wider network of outside agency contacts to meet training needs, through meetings and informal discussions [D1:5:1-2; D1:8:6; D1:13:5; E1:6:5-13; G1:21:10-23:1; I1:22:2-4]. In their comments, they noted how approachable these specialists were for developing their understanding of students' needs and how to support them [G1:21:10-22:7; I1:16:8-17:1].

Five of the seven participants had attended more formal training through the local outreach (Specialist Teaching and Learning Service) teams which was well received [C2:14:1-2; E2:11:2-5; F2:10:15-16]. During both interviews, Fiona and Grace noted that they had attended as much training as possible and had then cascaded this within school [F1:6:3-4; G1:21:10-23:1]. Fiona noted the benefits of this training including being *"inexpensive, it's local and very varied."* [F1:7:2] and *"It was useful, it was practical, I could use it in school. [...] a good balance between heavy theory stuff in the morning and practical solutions in the afternoon"* [F2:16:8-12]

Signifying what she thought of the Outreach training programme, Fiona noted that she told the new SENCo about it and *"We signed her up for loads there and then."* [F2:11:2-3]. Isabel stated that she had completed the Access Arrangements training course on her initial information form. Grace identified finances as a constraint to attending more training [G1:21:10-23:1; G2:17:7-13] noting that she attends as much as possible but has to balance this with the priorities of the school.

The NASC course was mentioned by several participants who commented on the benefits of both the content of the course and the opportunities it gave them to meet other people. Fiona identified the NASC as one of the most useful forms of training and she was able to reflect on aspects that had supported her development and factors that had been more challenging.

*"The essays were not useful. Not at all! But the training, like the face-to-face days they were really useful. I felt that the essays were just a bit of a waste of time. When you're doing, I was head of school for that year as well, doing that, two small children, then sitting at home and writing about politics and policy since 1978 it was really...tell me what I've got to do now"* [F1:15:11-15]

#### **5.7.4 Desire for more knowledge**

The desire for more knowledge was attributed to a variety of reasons, including acknowledgement that when you begin the role, you lack knowledge [D1:5:1] and that the role is continually evolving [D1:5:8-9; E2:16:5-8] so you need *"to keep up to date with the job"* [C1:6:15].

Participants stated that they are *"not adverse to doing more training. I like to know more."* [E1:8:4-5] and that despite experience and growing confidence as a SENCo, there is the need for continuing professional development. They recognised that you cannot know everything [F2:5:6-8] and need to seek information when *"a problem arises"* [G1:23:4-11].

Attendance at courses also provided an opportunity to network with others in the role to reduce isolation and becoming *“out of touch”* [C1:7:4-6].

Some participants noted that part of their motivation for taking on the role was for self-development [C2:3:8], a career, and a challenge [Isabel word web]. Isabel enthused that *“when I found the next step, I was given the possibility of doing it”* [I2:16:5-6] and this meant that she could *“learn new skills, [...] working with different people.”* [I1:21:8-13].

None of the participants spoke about identifying training needs or accessing training in relation to performance management. In contrast comments were made about needing to seek opportunities for themselves [C2:14:1-2; D1:15:4] *“to keep up to date with the job”* [C1:6:15-16]. When asked what type of training is available, David stated that he had not investigated it yet [D1:15:12], again suggesting that this is an embryonic concept and he had not identified any specific training opportunities.

In contrast, Fiona asserted the need for SENCo's to access training *“that is relevant and current”* [F2:4:13] throughout their career. During the second interview, she reflected on her time as a SENCo, mused over the experienced SENCo in her new setting and shared thoughts regarding people who have been in role for a long period of time.

*“The policy of insisting that only those who have come after 2009 have to get the [NASC] qualification is wrong. It's totally the wrong way around. SENCo's that I've worked with for many, many years are the ones who don't have that strategic vision. They see it still in that operational, managing kind of thing.”* [F2:4:13-5:1]

Grace discussed the relationship between professionalism, training and professional identity suggesting that the three are interlinked to support development [G2:16:13-16].

When considering their training needs, participants identified two distinct areas – those that form part of a skill set and those that relate to knowledge of different special educational needs. Having identified himself as a middle leader and head of faculty, David acknowledged that his leadership style can be too democratic and that this is an area for development [D1:15:4-10] alongside his data skills as he feels that changes to grading systems and primary schools using *“different ways of assessing”* [D1:17:8] affects transition and his relationships with parents. He also recognised that increased accountability *“in the last few years [means] it's become fundamental.”* [D1:18:2].

Some participants focused on the need to develop their knowledge of different specific needs to improving their ability to support class teachers. Emma made general comments about increasing her knowledge *“about different areas of SEN.”* [E1:12:8] including *“Irlen's training”* [E1:8:4] autism and dyslexia [E1:12:9].

Isabel identified a desire to better understand how a local authority works, to see if there is a way of working with them more effectively, to “have a better impact or better influence” [I1:20:2-3].

### 5.8 The experience of policy and guidance in relation to professional identity

Participants were asked whether any school, local or national policies and guidance have provided them with clarity around their SENCo professional identity.

Claire acknowledged the existence of such documents but spoke broadly without naming any and she was unaware whether there is any guidance specifically from independent schools [C2:14:12-15:6]. She stated that she had not looked at any policies “*for a while...the national stuff's a guideline isn't it, [...] but it doesn't always work in practice, so it's taking it and tweaking it for your own situation.*” [C2:15:9-11].

David shared his experience of the way in which changes to SEN and wider educational policy and guidance within school, locally and nationally have impacted on his role due to “*all the changes over the last few years the role seems to grow bigger and bigger every year [...] you're constantly behind the game from day one because there's so many things thrown at you.*” [D1:15:14-16:8] including changes to the curriculum and assessment policies [D1:16:11-15]. David, Emma and Fiona all commented on how paperwork and monitoring requirements impact on what they do and therefore their professional identity [D17:16-18:2; D19:7-13; E1:8:9-14; F1:17:1-8]. Isabel recognised that the interactions between SENCo and leadership can be enhanced or impeded by national guidance or policies, depending on how they are interpreted locally. She noted that league tables, the curriculum and systems for monitoring effectiveness can affect school practises and cause tensions with being inclusive and person-centred [I2:24:1-5].

Within SEN policy and guidance, participants noted how the changes to the SEN Code of Practice (DfE/DoH 2015) impacted upon their role and identity with Emma stating that it had “*a big effect.*” [E2:12:9]. Fiona found it hugely beneficial in providing clarity of the role as “*It told me what I needed to do and what my role was.*” [F2:18:1-2] and asserted the need to review her new school's SEN policy and SENCo job description in relation to this [F2:17:8-9]. Other participants gave examples both explicitly and implicitly about the SEN Code of Practice and how important training on this had been for them to understand expectations of all staff and of their role, hence having an impact on the development of their professional identity.

Grace [G2:19:8-14] and Holly noted that the guidance “*recommended that the SENCo is on the leadership team, and 100% should be*” [H1:4:9]. Holly is Assistant headteacher/ SENCo and on the

leadership team at the same school as Isabel who expressed concern about not having such a strong link with SLT when Holly retires as *"no-one who has not done it can understand the SENCo and the meaning of SEN [...] it's very complex."* [I2:17:8-10].

Following changes to the CoP, Local Authority practice also encountered some changes which participants highlighted as affecting their role and in turn their identity such as having the local offer on their website meaning there is greater opportunity for signposting [G2:19:8-14] and policies and paperwork that is specific to a local authority [E2:12:8-9]. When asked about local policies, Emma initially laughed and said: *"It's variable [laughs]"* [E2:13:1] but went on to explain that more recently the local authority had brought in one system to be used by all schools and this was positively impacting on her professional identity because *"it strengthens it, because everyone's doing the same forms, you know in the same way."* [E2:13:2-7].

Holly spoke about the previous SENCos, herself and the deputy SENCo completing the statutory NASC course. In addition, she made links with policies for other vulnerable groups related to attendance, welfare, pupil premium and more able pupils [H1:2:1-8].

Emma also shared that the way in which policy information is shared or accessible by others can impact upon her professional identity and how she is perceived. To combat this, she is *"trying to improve our website so we've got SEN on there and all different information about what we do"* [E2:13:14-16].

During the first interview, Fiona shared a tension between her love of the job and school budget constraints which meant that the role of Deputy Head was expensive, and she feels there has been a reduction in the number of these roles. She concluded that *"my option would then be to move school as Head teacher, which might not include SENCo, so I've got this position and I'm hanging on. I love this part of my job, but it's down to the funds now..."* [F1:18:14-19:3].

Most participants presented comments as a statement of fact, not a complaint. However, they indicated that changing policies and guidance have impacted their role, requiring the need to adapt and seek training for areas in which they feel less confident. In turn this has impacted the development of their professional identity.

## 5.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has shown how the lived experiences of the newly qualified SENCos often show similarities to create 'themes' but at times are also disparate due to individual circumstances.

The following chapter presents a discussion of the common themes and their relation to the development of the professional identity of newly qualified SENCos with reference to existing research and literature.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

### 6.1 Chapter overview

I have presented the findings to illustrate each participants' experience (Chapter 4) and through consideration of themes across participants (Chapter 5). In this chapter I will further explore the essence of how the participants experience their professional identity within their distinct environments (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008) and consider how these permeate across participants to create common or disparate themes in relation to existing literature. Some literature has not been previously referred to (Smith *et al*, 2009), as the findings and subsequent themes have emerged through the interactions with the newly qualified SENCos using an iterative hermeneutic cycle (*ibid*) rather than through predetermined criteria. The discussion is presented in relation to each of the research questions.

### 6.2 How is professional identity experienced and understood by newly qualified SENCos?

#### 6.2.1 Professional identity as a concept

SENCos have previously trained as teachers, worked with education guidance and policies such as Teacher's Standards (DfE, 2011) and the Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015). They are likely to have worked in settings with a colleague holding the role of SENCo. This suggests that newly qualified SENCos have knowledge of some of the working practices, personal characteristics and expertise required and that this may influence the ease with which professional identity is developed (Beijaard *et al*, 2000; 2004; Ibarra, 1999; Wenger, 1998). However, professional identity is a complex concept to define and rather than a focus on 'identity', most participants of this study described the many and varied job titles or roles that they hold in addition to that of SENCo.

During initial descriptions of their professional identity, most participants listed functions that they execute regularly with additional reflections focussing on the knowledge required to do the job and the social aspects of identity. Despite being asked specifically about their professional identity, it was what they do, which was foremost in their minds and a greater distinction between identity and roles may have been useful (Rosen-Webb, 2011). As practitioners, we do not often spend time reflecting on the deep meaning attributed to concepts such as our professional identity (Niemi, 1997) and it was only as the idea was explored over time that they were able to recognise and describe the many sub-identities that constituted their identity (Ballantyne and Zhukov, 2017).

Isabel was most cognisant of the phrase 'professional identity' and came closest to definitions gleaned from the literature which explores the complex, multi-faceted nature of identity that makes it so hard to define. She described it as:

*"who you identify with and skill and how you think about the job, the values, the beliefs that you have...and your experiences ...ultimately the person you are and who you want to become really... It's personal and professional. They interact of course."* (I1:1:2-9)

This supports the notion of identity as a social construct (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959) involving the interplay of personal and social identities (Slay and Smith, 2011). This was recognised by Claire [C1:1:8-9] and Grace [G1:2:5-6] who spoke about combining their perceptions with those of others although most participants were unsure if there is a "clear professional identity" (F1:1:3) considering it to be "more fractured." (D1:2:4).

The role of SENCo could be considered a discrete 'discipline' within education and may therefore have an identity, separate to that of teachers, or, like some health disciplines (Adams *et al*, 2006), be less well defined. This lack of clarity has persisted despite revisions to the Code of Practice (DfE, 1994; DfES, 2001a; DfE/DoH, 2015) and numerous literature (Hallett and Hallett, 2010; 2017; Curran *et al*, 2018) highlighting the impact of this.

Given that 'identity' may be considered an umbrella term for 'who you are' in a wide range of contexts and relationships, 'professional identity' must then be one spoke of that umbrella. Through reflection on individual contributions in this research, the many factors which affect how the SENCos experience their own professional identity were evident, influenced by both personal and social factors. Careful analysis of the transcripts resulted in four broad superordinate themes emerging: Impact of relationships, Sharing, Attributes and Knowledge. The first two of these lend themselves directly to social identity as they clearly involve social interaction, while the second two may sit more comfortably with personal identity. However, it was recognised that even within each of these broad areas, there is interplay (Dobson and Douglas, 2018; Crisp *et al*, 2006), for example, effective social interactions are reliant on competent communication skills.

The following sections of the discussion demonstrate how the newly qualified SENCos experience and understand the personal and social aspects of their professional identity.

### **6.2.2 The importance of teaching experience**

All participants in this study had substantial teaching experience before their appointment as SENCo. They expressed the importance of this, citing examples of how they draw on it to support colleagues, enabling them to feel more confident in their role, thus aiding the development of their professional identity. Reflecting Fitzgerald and Radford (2017), SENCos valued expertise over most factors that

supported them; within this study, teaching was predominant, although most felt novice in relation to SEN knowledge and experience.

Rosen-Webb (2011) described the SENCo as a trained and experienced teacher with professional skills and shared attributes between the two roles. With both teachers and SENCos working within the same settings and the same policy context, there will also be a shared focus on teaching and learning that utilises the same vocabulary. In the same way that new teachers evolve a teacher professional identity through transformation (Flores and Day, 2006) there is an expectation that teachers can morph into SENCos while learning on the job (Rosen-Webb, 2011). While newly qualified SENCos in this study were very clear about the need to be a practising teacher, this did not present itself as the only factor that enabled development of a new professional identity and highlighted that being a SENCo is different to being a teacher (Ekins, 2017).

### **6.2.3 "I do this...and I do this as well"**

Discussions evidenced most participants' surprise at the breadth and depth of the role with it being portrayed as "*very different*" [G1:26:14] to their expectations. From descriptions of being "*constantly behind*" [D1:15:14] to the "*unbelievable*" [I1:9:10] number of new professional relationships formed, the comments were not shared as a complaint but as observations. Fiona shared that the enormity of the role only dawned on her when she sat to explain it her successor.

Professional identity evolves when there is career transition (Slay and Smith, 2011; Beijaard *et al*, 2004) but many new-to-role SENCos may have expected the transition to be easy, having had shared traits and objectives as teachers (Adams *et al*, 2006; Haber and Lingard, 2001). Despite lack of clarity around the role being well-known (Hallett and Hallett, 2010; 2017; Ekins, 2015) it is important to listen to the voices of these newly qualified SENCos as they continue to express concern about their lack of knowledge prior to taking on the role and that the skills they did possess now needed to be used for different audiences. Each of the participants was "becoming a SENCo while being a SENCo" (Rosen-Webb, 2011:165). While some were able to build on leadership skills that they had already developed, all found themselves experiencing some level of concern or even panic as they were suddenly expected to be the 'expert' in SEN. For most, a lack of induction into the role and realising that they had not understood the role fully left them feeling isolated and challenged their existing professional identity, affecting confidence levels. Trede (2012) had highlighted how work-integrated learning can support the development of professional identity and yet there is a risk of 'praxis shock' (Ballantyne and Zhukov, 2017:241) as those new to role find themselves overwhelmed by what they have taken on.



All participants demonstrated changes in their professional identity during the second interview, showing greater levels of confidence, knowledge, and understanding of the role. Most were presenting stronger leadership skills and attributes that enabled greater agency for teachers through providing support and holding all staff accountable. For the majority, this evolution of their professional identity and associated confidence to enable change in their setting had taken almost a year. Professional identity is a fluid concept (Beijaard *et al*, 2004; Slay and Smith, 2011) that will constantly need to develop with changing understanding of SEN, pedagogy and policy. It is vital that those considering becoming a SENCo or those who are new to role are provided with the support required to develop their identity with expediency to ensure that they are best equipped to support pupils, their families and teachers to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed which could result in retention issues.

#### **6.2.4 The emotional element**

Caring for people and having empathy with those they work with was evident and considered important to participants in this study. This was demonstrated through desired outcomes for pupils and consideration of how their skills aid communication and effective relationships with others. While caring and empathy underpin professional identity for many SENCos, O'Connor (2008) explored the need to balance this with a control of emotions, describing some of her participants as considering themselves to work as dispassionate service providers, reflecting Holly's view about being "*pragmatic. You can't get emotional*" [H1:13:6].

The level of emotional impact was different for each of the participants (Ekins, 2015) with all of them acknowledging the high and lows, often relating this to outcomes for the pupils and occasionally to workload. Interestingly, Fiona and Grace felt the emotional impact most keenly and unexpectedly. They spoke of the intensity of the role and the responsibility that they feel towards ensuring all staff meet the needs of the pupils with SEN. Fiona shared her experience of supporting a family with a new (and unexpected) diagnosis for their child as being like a grieving process, while Grace stated that she had not "*thought of the wider effect of*" (G1:26:14) the role. While those on middle leadership may seek support from their senior leadership team, this raises the issue of how those in more senior positions secure support. Furthermore, it is vital to recognise that participants continue to be unprepared for the emotional impact of the role (Mackenzie, 2012; Ekins, 2015), despite being experienced teachers and school leaders.

Some participants spoke of their motivation for role being related to their own personal experiences and it is therefore possible that the emotional impact is entwined between their school and personal lives (Nias, et al, 1989). With current focus in mainstream media on positive mental health and

emotional well-being, it is vital that staff who do experience extreme emotions (in particular) are well supported both within school, and beyond as necessary, with emphasis on the need to be open about emotions and their impact.

All participants showed awareness of both their emotions and those of other people. This emotional intelligence seems to have been fuelled by a willingness to communicate what they feel, the impact upon them and the importance of being reflective or self-critical. In this study, SENCo's suggested that the emotional toll was not having a severe impact, and all shared how easily they could access collegiate support. For some, this may have been the first time they had articulated these feelings about the emotional side of the role beyond dealing with an event at the time of occurrence. During this study, only Isabel explicitly spoke of the need to be reflexive to "*question some of my knee jerk reactions*" [12:21:6] and to stop to consider next steps. In acknowledging the range of emotions encountered as an issue, it raises questions about how staff can be supported to engage in reflective and reflexive practices (Niemi, 1997; Hallett and Hallett, 2017) or direct supervision and support (Reid and Soan, 2018) to improve their own practice. Taking time to recognise their emotions and therefore carry out their role in a more emotionally intelligent manner should aid their sense of identity (Ekins, 2017).

### **6.2.5 Putting the personal into professional identity**

The personal identity which the individual brings to the role of SENCo will have been built since birth and constructed both of innate factors and influences and experiences from living in a social world (Gecas, 1982; Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

The constituent parts of personal identity were sometimes voiced directly while at other times, they were implied within descriptions of activities that had been undertaken. It was through careful reflection on both explicit and implicit representations that common themes began to emerge and from this, more specific, detailed comments about elements of their personal identity that came to the fore. This suggested that factors such as attributes (personal characteristics and professional skills), knowledge including past experiences, and faith, values and beliefs (Hallett and Hallett, 2017) have the most significant impact on their self-concept (Slay and Smith, 2011).

These SENCo's made significantly more comments about their personal attributes than any other theme that emerged, and while IPA does not base themes on prevalence (Smith and Osborn, 2003), it was clear that what was being said was also of significance to them. An attribute may be described as a quality or feature that is considered as a characteristic or inherent part of someone. This superordinate theme may encompass a wealth of characteristics, but through the iterative cycle of

analysis it became clearer that the descriptions broadly fell into two areas: those of skills and personal characteristics.

Within the sub-theme of skills, three main areas emerged as important to the SENCo's through descriptions of their professional identity: strategic leadership skills, emotional intelligence (discussed in 6.1.4) and communication skills.

Firstly, and seemingly most important to them, was having competent and effective strategic and leadership skills. Three participants with senior leadership team positions, were most well versed in leading change management, and presented with strong professional identity as leaders which is likely to be related to their leadership status (Slay and Smith, 2011). Their language about being strategic and proactive contrasted with other participants or peers showing that across the sector, there remains variability in the capacity and perceptions of the role as a strategic leader (Layton, 2005; Rosen-Webb, 2011). Fortunately for Fiona, she now recognises that she enjoys being strategic, something that had been a surprise to her. These three participants felt it was their positional leadership that enabled them to enact change within their settings, reflecting a shift from 'managing and running' (Layton, 2005:55) systems to a need for a more strategic leadership style (Cheminais, 2015; Woolhouse, 2015). Despite the perceived benefits of positional leadership, relatively few SENCo's are currently on senior leadership teams (Dobson, 2019) and Hallett and Hallett (2017) contend that it is more important to have the skills to be an agent for change.

The concept of positional leadership was more nuanced in the experiences of Fiona and Grace compared to Holly. They held dual roles as Deputy Head and SENCo in primary schools, with one of their main responsibilities as Deputy Head being teaching and learning. Both indicated that roles fitted together to make efficient use of their time and while noting that the position of Deputy Head "added a bit of weight" (F2:8:11), they also spoke of the need to support and empower staff and to lead by example. In contrast, Holly discussed the hierarchical nature of teaching in terms of its management and responsibility structures. Her rhetoric focused on the length and range of her experience (Malvern and Skidmore, 2001) and the notion of leadership as a role of "power". It was clear that being part of the leadership team (*ibid*) formed a significant part of her identity, rather than just the skills associated with strategic leadership. This may relate to needing a sense of belonging (Wenger, 1998) or, following processes of observing, experimenting, and re-evaluating over many years (Ibarra, 1999; Bleakley, 2004), this is now her predominant perception of her identity.

While other participants did not hold positional leadership nor speak overtly of their leadership skills, most illustrated these (Cheminais, 2015) and showed how they have influenced practice in

schools through line management, providing teaching and learning support and holding staff accountable for the progress of pupils with SEN. However, practice also included more management activities such as coordinating support, making referrals and mediating between people. While most participants were at ease with the different levels of responsibility, it was a source of tension (Layton, 2005; Rosen-Webb, 2011) for Claire who felt unable to enact change or to make strategic decisions (Dooreward and Brouns, 2003). There was a correlation between participation in leadership positions or skills and development of professional identity (Slay and Smith, 2011) with the lack of agency having a notable impact for Claire (Notman, 2017).

Communication skills were deemed important, with participants sharing many types of communication including mediating, persuading, negotiating, delivering 'tough messages' (F2:6:2), providing advice and to be a 'friendly ear' (I1:8:16-9:4) with a wide range of stakeholders. While this has been noted by many (Kearns, 2005; Cheminais, 2015), participants in this study specifically stated that listening is imperative [I1:22:14-23:4] and that it could result in different approaches and outcomes, highlighting the importance of dialogue with parents (DCSF, 2009; DfE/DoH, 2015; Hallett and Hallett, 2017). This was further aided by participants being accessible and approachable and recognising that their position may impede communication. Through high levels of interpersonal skills (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017) and with timely communication, these experienced staff (Haber and Lingard, 2001; Adams *et al*, 2006) were able to adapt their communication skills more easily to suit the audience. These skills have an impact both on effective relationships and have aided development of professional identity (Bleakley, 2006).

Operational skills were mentioned less frequently during this study compared with extant literature, and rarely in relation to professional identity. Interestingly, those with leadership positions made most comments regarding the challenge and necessity of some operational skills such as administration, the ability to delegate, securing funds and sharing information to improve support. Bureaucracy has long been a contention within the role (Gross, 2013) but the discussions during this study suggested that understanding the purpose of it and creating streamlined systems within whole school practice (Ekins and Grimes, 2009) had a significant positive impact both for pupils and for the efficiency of the SENCO which in turn helped them feel more confident, supporting their professional development.

In addition, all participants spoke of how their demeanour aided their practice and helped to develop their professional identity. Within this study, some of the most prevalent demeanours included flexibility, passion, perseverance, positive work ethic, being reserved and being confident.

Flexibility and being open-minded has not been overtly discussed in the extant literature yet appeared to be important to, or innate within, all the participants as they expressed various ways in which they have been flexible and how this has aided them. Significant flexibility was shown by six participants who took on the role following the departure of a colleague, with only one of these having planned such a possible move (see 6.2.7). The need for flexibility was also described in response to individual situations, and policy and practice changes (see also 6.4). Through their willingness to look openly at a situation and to work flexibly with others or within a system, participants illustrated how this is more positive for them and those they work with. While flexibility may be an innate personality trait, it is also feasible that it has developed with experience and as such contributes to professional identity development (Slay and Smith, 2011).

The upbeat outlook portrayed by most participants reflected their enjoyment of the role, due to the variety, challenge, and transformative nature of the work. They affirmed that they would recommend the role to colleagues considering it as a career path adding the caveat that they would need to be really interested in SEN, passionate and recognise that “they’re not an SEN child, they are a child with SEN” [G1:3:12-15]. This response demonstrated optimism and interest in how people learn (Rosen-Webb; 2011). For some, passion as a motivator was paired with the need for perseverance akin to Woolhouse’s (2012) ‘caring warriors’ (p754). Characteristics such as needing to be “*a little bit stubborn*” [C1:7:12-13] or an “*absolute powerhouse of energy and determination*” (H1:14:8) are personality traits which can be held by anyone, regardless of knowledge and experience, but which are deemed by these practitioners as vital to the success of what they do (Kearns, 2005; Layton, 2005; Woolhouse, 2012; Cheminais, 2015).

Participants described the need for high levels of energy to support a positive work ethic as it is “*hard work*” [G1:28:10] and they “*work flat out*” [H1:5:5] often feeling that they have fallen behind due to workload (Cowne, 2005; Mackenzie, 2007; Qureshi, 2014; Curran *et al*, 2018). However, there is a need to balance this against descriptors of a workforce who are not “*clock watchers*”, and who would find it “*stressful trying to do the job just in office hours*” [H1:15:2-4] as this affects work-life balance. This requires careful line management by someone who understands the pressures of the role, as employing someone who has a great work ethic may be useful in the short-term, but they are likely to experience ‘burn-out’ or apathy over time, affecting retention (Pearson, 2008).

These skills and personality traits are reflective of role descriptors provided by Kearns (2005) and Cheminais (2015). While both had proposed that these factors could be used to support recruitment and training, participants’ experiences in this study would suggest that they do not easily fit into one

discrete variation, rather they adopt features of each, influenced by their personal identity and context within which they are working, reflecting early findings by Hallett and Hallett (2018).

### **6.2.6 Shared experiences and social identity within the construct of professional identity**

Alongside personal characteristics, social factors affecting professional development have long been acknowledged (Gecas, 1982; Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Within this study, participants spoke of how shared experiences and understanding within and beyond their settings helped to increase their feelings of confidence and reduce a sense of isolation (Rosen-Webb, 2011).

Participants found that holding the title of SENCo meant that most staff assumed them to be an SEN expert (Kearns, 2005) with greater knowledge or skills than other people in school. Gaps in knowledge and experience were difficult for some to ratify against otherwise strong identities as school leaders and alongside being "*naturally reserved*" [G1:21: 3]; confidence had to be built through experience and training (Ibarra, 1999; Trede, 2012). This discrepancy between staff perceptions sometimes based on historical practice (Hallett and Hallett, 2017) and their own perceptions was a real challenge to their identity and was compounded by frustration that not all staff understand their role (Pearson and Ralph, 2007; Rosen-Webb, 2011). Expectations included a "*magic wand*" to "*fix*" a problem through 'non-ownership' (Cornwall, 2012:137). However, despite all CoPs (DfE, 1994; DfES, 2001a; DfE/DoH 2015) stating that teachers' responsibilities for all children, including those with SEN, and promotion of inclusion through guidance (DfES, 2001b; 2002; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2005), newly qualified SENCo's also lacked a full understanding of the role when they took it on. Furthermore, a lack of understanding about the level of work undertaken with external agencies (Pearson and Ralph, 2007) and variability in efficient responses also affected relationships in school and with parents. This shows persistent lack of understanding of the role by many stakeholders and the impact on practice and identity.

Being part of a larger team and having experienced colleagues was identified as hugely supportive and gave a sense of shared responsibility for the secondary school participants while SENCo's in primary schools did not have this experience. Ideas of shared responsibility (Pearson and Ralph, 2007), a universal approach (Mackenzie, 2007; Norwich, 2010; Oldham and Radford, 2011) and removal of an expert model (Florian and Linklater, 2009) have been proposed alongside recognising that a shared collective identity (Ekins, 2017) can help build inclusive practices in schools. Working with staff in the school to promote shared understanding (Ibarra, 1999) and shared purpose and collaboration (Layton, 2005; Ainscow *et al*, 2006; Ekins and Grimes, 2009) regarding responsibility for supporting all pupils enabled participants to develop more inclusive practice and they felt that it had made their professional identity stronger. Unfortunately, although Claire had made progress with

individual teachers, power relationships and dominant organisational views in her setting (Dooreward and Brouns, 2003) were felt to affect her ability to implement change and therefore stymied development of her professional identity.

All participants in the study expressed the need for support and trust of the headteacher and wider leadership team. Both policy documents (DfE/DoH, 2015) and literature have promoted the role of the headteacher in supporting the SENCO to implement statutory guidance (Woods et al, 1997; Hallett and Hallett, 2017) and create inclusive cultures through shared leadership (Dyson et al, 2002) showing this is imperative (Cowne, 2005). Participants also recognised how the ethos of a school and values of its headteacher impact on their role and ability to initiate or sustain change in the school (Wearmouth, 2016). So, while the necessity of support from the headteacher was not a surprise, what participants stated more explicitly was the distinct difference between being backed and trusted and having a headteacher with the knowledge and skills to upskill them as SENCOs. Particularly where a SENCO is working in isolation, rather than in a team, this suggests that there may be no-one within their setting to provide support or collaboration to “sustain the momentum of change” (Harris, 2007:21) or help with professional identity development.

It was evident that participants who demonstrated greatest development of their professional identity perceived themselves to be trusted and supported by the headteacher, leadership team and the governors. They were working in an environment in which CPD was valued and used to promote shared ethos and vision to support pupils and their families. Promoting and leading change within an environment that shared responsibility was seen as positive and rewarding, and reflections by those SENCOs highlighted considerable improvements in their levels of confidence. In contrast, when the aspiration of the SENCO was not shared by the headteacher, staff did not share responsibility (Pearson and Ralph, 2007), parents were reluctant to engage with the SENCO and there was little opportunity to network with other professionals, professional identity development was stymied. These observations highlighted the relationship between the social interactions, shared beliefs and purpose within a setting, professional expectations of other stakeholders (Hellowell, 2018) and the development of professional identity, demonstrating how context can affect those new to role.

While acknowledging the personal characteristics within professional identity, it is important to consider that the influence of proximal relationships within and beyond the setting may have even greater impact (Dobson and Douglas, 2018; Hellowell, 2018).

### **6.2.7 By act or design? The role of agency**

Initially five participants shared how they were appointed when the previous post-holder retired or left the school, and during the second interview, Isabel confirmed her promotion to the role within the school. In each case, they were approached by the Headteacher and asked to take on this additional responsibility (Pearson and Mitchell, 2013), not something that was previously considered. All acknowledged that this evolution of their role made sense and was a positive experience. Grace recognised that it was more cost-effective for the school and through combining the roles, she was time-efficient using her expertise as a Deputy Head with responsibility for teaching and learning to improve practice for pupils with SEN. This shows that being prepared to take on the role, which was a detour to their chosen career path, had a positive impact on both them and the organisation.

While none of the participants had begun their careers intending to become a SENCo, only Claire had actively pursued it, initially working within a SEN team before applying to her current setting. And yet within the role, Claire presents as having least agency which she attributes to the type of setting (Flores and Day, 2006) in which parents may not wish to be seen speaking with her (Slay and Smith, 2011) and tension between her own beliefs about the purpose of the role and those of her colleagues, particularly those who hold more senior positions (Beijaard *et al*, 2000; 2004). The emotional toll for Claire was evident, yet she felt unable to address this which could impact on her retention in the longer term.

### **6.2.8 Concluding comments**

The SENCos in this study demonstrated that it is through synchronised ownership and development of both professional capital (expert knowledge, high levels of education and outstanding practice) and social capital (the use of experience, expertise and social and interpersonal skills) that their professional identity became more secure. Furthermore, through compatibility of personal and school identity to create a shared collective identity (Ekins; 2017) and positional leadership, they were most able to develop agency and be most effective in their role, cyclically improving their confidence and professional identity.

All participants demonstrated improved understanding of their professional identity. While the importance of personal or social factors can be debated, this ongoing "journey from layperson to [the] skilled professional" (Crues *et al*, 2015:1) that they wish to become (Beijaard *et al*, 2004) has been portrayed as the interaction of these factors. This gradual transformation is a dynamic process, achieved through socialisation (Crues *et al*, 2015) and self-reflection to process differences between



the personal and social aspects of identity for acceptance or change (Niemi, 1997, Wenger, 1998, Ibarra, 1999) to promote development of professional identity.

### **6.3 Do Newly Qualified SENCo's understand their support needs and how are these met within or beyond their school?**

#### **6.3.1 Reflection and reality**

Within existing literature, the focus is on 'SENCo's' rather than specifically on those who have recently joined the role and while some consider the impact of training or induction (Pearson and Mitchell, 2013), questions of whether they understand their support needs or how these are met are less evident.

Most participants could identify some gaps in their knowledge or skills, including leadership and management skills, use of data, understanding specific areas of SEN, understanding local or national systems and emotional support. Some had accessed considerable amounts of training whilst three had attended none. Training had been identified to support a particular child or a 'directory' had been used to identify what 'looked useful'. The process was ad hoc and not part of performance management cycles nor necessarily related to the school's development plan or a structured CPD programme (Beijaard *et al*, 2000; 2004; Layton, 2005). This does not reflect the policy intentions of creating a guide to support school leaders in supporting the development of effective SENCo's (DfE, 2018b). As new practitioners it will be hard to fully understand where there are gaps in knowledge and skills unless a specific need arises and will therefore lead to reactionary training rather than proactive development, something that needs addressing at local and national level.

The financial implications of training and the need to balance SENCo development with the needs of the school and best use of resources available was understood. This also related to discussions about time for training and balancing this with other commitments (see also 6.2.3). Participants demonstrated creative ways they had organised additional support through their outreach teams, although noted that many of these are now buy-in services. Both time and effective use of resources are the responsibility of not just the SENCo but with the headteacher and governors (DfE/DoH, 2015) and it is important that through use of whole school systems (Ekins and Grimes, 2009) more effective planning for training is recognised.

Having recognised their need for emotional support, this was again described as ad hoc with support based on their own initiative, usually speaking with the Headteacher or a colleague, or occasionally offloading at home. Reid and Soan (2018) identified that participants in their study had not readily

understood their needs nor the role of supervision in addressing these. However, at the end of their project, participants commented on the benefits with one noting that it is a form of solution-focused support. There is not an official system of coaching and mentoring for all teachers or SENCo's in England, although with increased awareness about the need to support employees' emotional well-being, it is increasingly important to address this within schools and Local Authorities.

### **6.3.2 The right person for the job at the right time**

While guidance documents such as the CoP (DfE/DoH, 2015) state the need for the SENCo to be supported, and legislation directs completion of the mandatory NASC course within three years of starting the role (DCSF, 2009b), as discussed in 6.3.1, identifying training needs is not straight forward. Furthermore, within this study, participants voiced more nuanced thoughts about *who* or *how* training is provided, and how to integrate this with other commitments. This seemed to be exacerbated due to variations in post-holders being full- or part-time and with other responsibilities.

At the outset of this new career path, induction would seem an important factor in the success of SENCos developing their professional identity (Flores and Day, 2006). As we move from one role to another, support is needed to develop reflective thinking to ratify personal histories and social context (Notman, 2017) by those with expert knowledge or skills. Participants who had shadowed a SENCo prior to appointment, or those who had mentoring or coaching (Ekins, 2015) from an experienced colleague (Ekins, 2017), spoke very positively of this in supporting their development. Nias et al (1989) comment on the use of "professional parents', to provide ideas, information, practical help, for emotional support and for friendship" (p135). This shows how such support can be beneficial, but much extant literature focuses on how SENCos can support colleagues, with less consideration for how they are supported.

Local Authority SENCo meetings provided SENCos with updates to policies or practice (Rosen-Webb, 2011). However, they were also considered too large, often overwhelming for new SENCos due to the quantity of information or 'jargon' used and little opportunity to network (Griffiths and Dubsky, 2012). The challenge of balancing meetings with exam group teaching affected one participant's ability to attend these meetings. Having previously organised such events, and having trialled different formats and combinations, it was interesting to hear these persistent barriers, particularly from the view of newly qualified SENCos, as feedback tends to use scales which are generally positively scored with few additional comments shared. This is an important contribution to enable LAs to consider how information is disseminated and how the needs of SENCos change over their careers.

In contrast several participants spoke of the huge benefits they have found from small, informal networks of colleagues meeting locally. Through being encouraged to critically reflect, share openly and without judgement, and make decisions as part of a community, participants explained how they have been able to develop their knowledge, skills and practice enabling them to become more confident practitioners through shared identity and interests with others (Ibarra, 1999; Crisp *et al*, 2006; Mackenzie, 2012; Woolhouse, 2015). Local collaborations need to be seen as professional learning networks to build capacity and collegiality.

The National Award for SENCo's (NASC) aims to enable new SENCo's to acquire the knowledge and skills required to develop professional and proactive practice (Liasidou and Svensson, 2012), using direct teaching (Haber and Lingard, 2001) of theory and policy through critical thinking and practical application (Wenger, 1998). Participants reported their NASC cohorts were small and very useful for developing understanding of SEN developments and opportunity to have discussions with peers. However, there remain frustrations about academic assignments related to history when they were so busy in their new roles and lacking knowledge of specific areas of SEN (Ekins, 2015). Hallett and Hallett (2017) provide a discussion about NASC learning outcomes in relation to practice and the current research adds to this and similar findings from Griffiths and Dubsky's (2012) study of course evaluation reports, through provision of more specific details, possibly due to the independent nature of this current enquiry. Furthermore, completion of the course did not always correlate with development of their professional identity or opportunity to lead on inclusive reforms (Liasidou and Svensson, 2012) which seemed to be related to organisational structures. A review of the NASC Learning outcomes has been expected, and while the introduction of the Master's level course was to raise the professional status of the SENCo it will be interesting to see how feedback from students via the providers group is used to consider course content and assessment routes in future.

Participants shared the benefits of shared reflection and experiences, collegiate discussions during the NASC course, attendance at local SENCo forums and professional discussions with outside agencies to allow them to [extrinsically or intrinsically] consider their professional identity. These may be considered forms of work-integrated learning (Trede 2012) and this is impeded when schools employ an individual as SENCo with little time to liaise with others.

Good quality formal training was lauded by two participants who highlighted that the providers were well-versed in using the strategies and there was a 'good balance' between theory and application, meaning that they returned to school ready to support colleagues. Through provision of direct teaching (Haber and Lingard, 2001) combined with a social interaction to support learning and doing

(Wenger, 1998) there was a positive impact on confidence, development of professional identity and school practice.

There was acknowledgement amongst participants that emotions are natural responses, but that these need to be recognised and supported. While they named a person or people within their setting who they can speak with, no-one has formal 'supervision'. Grace felt that as a professional she had learnt to manage this however, with attrition well documented (NAHT, 2017; Curran *et al*, 2018), line management meetings or formal supervision could support SENCo's to share and work through the emotional aspects of the role to support their well-being and retention (Reid and Soan, 2018).

While most participants spoke very positively of the support that they receive from their specialist teaching or outreach teams through meetings, emails, and training, Claire missed this having moved to an independent school. She was unaware of any support available through the independent sector, suggesting either a lack of support or lack of communication about how to access this. Subsequent searches have shown that the Independent Schools Council has a Special Educational Needs and Disability Expert Group, but this information had not been shared with Claire by her predecessor, headteacher or governors. While not legally required to follow the CoP (DfE/DoH, 2015), independent schools do tend to have a person employed in this capacity and therefore they should be supported in their development and understanding akin to Local Authority support, particularly if the expert group is already in existence.

### **6.3.3 Concluding comments:**

Most participants expressed some support needs however, this was in an informal, ad hoc manner and usually without support from a more experienced colleague. They were able to add more nuanced insight into the type of support that they require and some of the factors that they feel affect the impact of such support or training, including who provides it, how and the time to do the training. While appropriately sourced training and induction was shown to have a positive impact for newly qualified SENCo's, gaps in their knowledge and skills were seen to have a notable effect on the confidence to support staff and other stakeholders, subsequently, impacting on their professional identity.

#### **6.4 How do newly qualified SENCos link their professional identity to school, local and national policies or wider world views?**

Over recent years, national policies and (changing) inclusion agendas have had an impact upon the role of the SENCo, with their remit locally translated and affected by the context in which they work (Hallett and Hallett, 2010;2017; Norwich, 2010; Petersen, 2010; Ekins 2015). Schools have been 'bombarded' (Petersen, 2010:19) by large numbers of new initiatives, guidance documents and legislation and yet, until prompted, no participants related this to their professional identity. Subsequently, they mainly focused on their job description and the CoP (DfE/DoH, 2015), stating that this had reinvigorated discussions in school but may be perceived differently in other agencies. Two participants referred to the school's SEN policy and the local offer, with the latter considered helpful for signposting parents; this supported the development of their professional identity as they were considered more knowledgeable.

Tensions between policy and practice have affected teachers' sense of self, self-esteem and identity (Woods *et al*, 1997), and changes to the CoP (DfES 2001a) had caused some conflict (Beijaard *et al*, 2004), but it was lack of consciousness of policies that was more evident in this study. Reflecting on my time as a SENCo and later as an advisor within a Local Authority, I did not regularly receive policy updates and was not directed to share specific guidance except the revised CoP (DfE/DoH, 2015). With increasing use of technology, I chose to participate in professional associations and sign up to appropriate sources to receive updates, but I wonder how those new to role are aware of such resources and how to navigate through the swathes of websites to ensure that they are receiving professional and timely advice? As busy SENCos who are new to role, this is unlikely to be a high priority and it is therefore important that they are signposted effectively.

##### **6.4.1 The impact of a fractured identity**

Individuals in this study found it hard to articulate what was meant by their own professional identity showing the complexity of the concept (Kearns, 2005; Pearson and Ralph, 2007; Cheminais, 2015). Local interpretation of the CoP (DfE/DoH, 2015) alongside the variety of roles that they all held added to their lack of clarity (Woolhouse, 2015). Only David described himself as an SEN specialist based on his qualifications and experiences. Some shared that through reading and re-reading the CoP, 'must' statements provided clarity to the purpose of the role and helped them focus on the strategic nature and the need to encourage shared responsibility.

This study has shown that there are generic factors in the professional identity of a SENCo as well as factors that made them unique, due to their personal identity and the specific setting within which

they work. Rather than shy away from developing a generic picture or SENCo model (Kearns, 2005) several participants said that this would be useful as a 'starting point' as having a clear identity was seen as a key factor in enhancing professional confidence. Furthermore, if those in post are unclear about their role (Dobson and Douglas, 2018), it is unsurprising that other school staff, parents and outside agencies also lack understanding. Identity formation is dynamic and will be affected by discrepancy between a SENCo's own self-concept and perceptions of others (Slay and Smith, 2011; Pearson and Ralph, 2007). Ultimately, lack of understanding about what is being taken on, variability in the role and what is expected of SENCos (Dobson and Douglas, 2018) are impacting on recruitment and retention issues (NAHT, 2017; Curran *et al*, 2018), something that may be avoided through strategic support and developing the understanding of the whole workforce.

#### 6.4.2 Tensions with other policies

Warnock (2005) and MacBeath *et al* (2006) raised concerns about inclusion in relation to identification of the most appropriate placement through maintaining choice. There have been increasing tensions due to conflicts between inclusion and attainment agendas (Petersen, 2010; Norwich, 2010; Ekins, 2015; Ekins 2017) due to performance measures against which schools can be compared. Although an intention to 'remove the bias towards inclusion' (DfE, 2011:4) was stated, later policy documents stressed the need for inclusive practices (DfE/DoH, 2015). David exemplified the tensions for himself as SENCo describing the need to balance pupil well-being and inclusion in an appropriate curriculum against changes to curriculum and grading systems. This was further compounded by lack of understanding of the changes causing concern for the parent. This shows how the role of SENCo is affected 'by contradictory policy landscapes that foreground both 'inclusion' and excellence' (Liasidou and Svensson, 2012:37).

SENCos have been impacted by the inclusion agenda as more children with SEN were being taught in mainstream schools (Sakellariadis, 2010) which in some cases led to low expectations by staff, amid attainment agendas and increased budget constraints. In contrast, practice for all participants in the current study was underpinned by an inclusive, child-centred approach that focused on improving outcomes for the student (Hallett and Hallett, 2017). It was unclear whether this was due to their attributes or policies, but it was both stated overtly and alluded to, for example, Holly's annoyance that her predecessor had not secured funding to support the pupils. Positive values and beliefs related to policies on inclusion were linked to 'rights' and the need for changes in teaching to meet the needs of the children. This was juxtaposed with language more suggestive of a battle (Layton, 2005; Woolhouse, 2012), with Fiona describing herself as a "*champion for the underdog*" (F2:4:1) and Isabel balancing inclusion with the needs of other pupils to make sure "*nobody is damaged by it*

*or is suffering for it.*" (12:6:13-14) which encapsulated the views of other participants. While driven by positive intentions and beliefs, where there was felt to be opposition or resistance, this made the role much harder and may link with burnout or retention issues due to conflict between the SENCo's existing professional identity and responses to policy changes (Hellawell, 2018).

The participants expressed the notion of inclusion in terms of how children could be supported to stay within mainstream classrooms through providing advice and guidance to the teachers and TAs as an agent for change (Hallett and Hallett, 2017). Most had demonstrated significant effort to promote systems that made it easier for children, young people and their parents or carers to be involved in decision-making (Lamb, 2009; Petersen, 2010; Ekins, 2015). Some indicated that the 'ethos' of inclusion was promoted by the headteacher and senior leadership team which enabled them to promote shared responsibility for supporting all pupils. However, there was no discussion of inclusion in relation to Alternative Provision or Special Schools. Within the independent school, the concept of inclusion was promoted, but the reality involved additional charges for support, which was often provided by the SENCo outside the classroom.

Participants highlighted how changes to funding models impacts on buy-in services and whether provision is the responsibility of education, health, or social care. This affects schools and the SENCo, who find themselves under increasing pressure, unable to provide resources, or whole staff training, causing further tensions within school, with parents and other professionals. The NAHT (2017) report recognised the impact of this on recruitment across the education sector including SENCo's due to the 'funding crisis' (p5) and called for the government to ensure schools are fully staffed and resourced. While funding models are under review, and additional funding for SEN promised, this is primarily focused on High Needs Funding and other funding continues not to be ring-fenced.

The CoP (DfE/DoH 2015) asserts the need for shared responsibility for the identification of and provision for children with SEN and all the participants agreed the need for this, so that their role could be more strategic than operational. However, the policy also demands a discrete position which usually attracts additional responsibility payment (Dobson, 2019). This could be an additional cause for tension and detract from other staff being willing to contribute. Furthermore, the participants expressed the role of SENCo as a discrete role in terms of requiring greater SEN knowledge themselves to be seen as the expert who can provide training and use delegation to lead change in practice across the setting. This perception may relate to the new to role SENCo's confidence to lead a team across a setting. While this notion is akin to a Head of Faculty who has an overview and strategic plan for their department, the role of SENCo, working with policies that promote whole school visions for SEND (Ekins and Grimes, 2009) currently seems quite exclusionary

with systems that often run separately to other whole school systems (Ekins, 2015). While promoting the need for devolved and shared responsibilities (Norwich, 2010; Hallett and Hallett, 2017), further evolution of the role as a whole school leader seems to be required to develop inclusive practices across the education system.

Considering comments by participants about competing agendas as new policies and pedagogy emerges and schools are constrained by budgetary changes, it seems that SEND is not as high up on the agenda as some policy makers may like to believe. In addition, the research has shown that agency to enable change is also bound up in context as well as knowledge and therefore implementation of a new policy does not equate to its success. Hellowell (2018) stated that professional identity can be 'reaffirmed or remade in response to policy innovation' (p166). This reflects Cheminais' (2015) assertion that policy change can provide both opportunities and barriers suggesting that through developing practice to meet policy requirements, professional identity may be strengthened, while if tensions remain, development may be impeded.

#### 6.4.3 Beliefs and values

Definitions of professional identity, often include factors such as 'values' (Gecas, 1982; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Slay and Smith 2011) and beliefs (Ibarra, 1999). During discussions with the SENCOs in this study, many found it hard to separate values and beliefs, sometimes using the two words interchangeably. Inclusion has been related to valuing difference and providing opportunities for all (Dyson *et al*, 2002) through shared values or consensus (Ekins, 2015). Participants whose leadership team or school had shared views about inclusion felt more secure in their professional identity (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017).

When discussing values and beliefs, for two participants, this was directly linked to their Christian faith with Claire stating that her faith was at the "*base*" of everything she does and that "*the way I see people is based on my faith*" (C2:3:11-12) and Fiona explaining that her Christian values meant that "*love comes before everything else*" (F2:5:12). Despite this strong feeling, they were both hesitant about stating this, with one asking if it was alright to do so. When something is deemed so important to a person and does not cause harm to others, I felt uncomfortable that they did not feel at ease to share their beliefs. Faith has not been discussed in the literature in relation to SENCO identities but underpinned practice for these participants.

While beliefs for these two participants are part of their consciousness, values are not something often spoken about because often they are 'so deeply buried, we don't even know what they are' (Nias *et al*, 1989:11). Whether secular or religious, each of the SENCOs expressed values and beliefs



(Layton, 2005) that underpinned their praxis, indicating that the SENCo role had a moral purpose (Pearson, 2010). Through a shared belief system in which colleagues care for one another, Kugelmass (2004) suggests that it is possible to work with 'irresolvable dilemmas' (p122) while conversely, when professional beliefs differ, this can act as a barrier to effective multi-professional working (Soan, 2012).

Beliefs, values, faith and rights are expressions of world views. Participants shared these in different ways including religious beliefs, social justice through supporting pupils to contribute to society or understanding their different life experiences. However, where there was understanding, sharing or acceptance of views, this was supportive of both practice and professional identity development.

#### **6.4.4 Concluding comments**

While initially not making any explicit comments to relate their professional identity to policies and wider world views, participants did discuss the topic implicitly or later directly. Supportive factors included shared understanding of the SENCo role or shared beliefs and values with colleagues.

Where there was dissension or where policies were hard to ratify, this caused tension for the SENCo and affected their role and purpose so impacting on the professional identity.

#### **6.5 Chapter summary**

Through this discussion chapter, I have focused on the three research questions to show how this study has affirmed extant literature but also provided original knowledge through direct engagement with previously untapped voices as a distinct group. This has shown how the SENCo's experience and understand their professional identity, support needs and links with policies and wider world views. In the next chapter, I will highlight the conclusions of this research and implications for the future.

## Chapter 7 Conclusions, implications and recommendations

### 7.1 Chapter overview

This chapter discusses the implications of the findings from this research for SENCOs, school leaders, National Awards for SENCOs educators and policy makers. It will consider possible limitations, share suggestions for further research and reflect upon my own role in the research. I have fully responded to all the research questions posed at the outset of this research based on the current experiences of the newly qualified SENCOs.

### 7.2 Summary of key findings and implications

The findings reflect earlier research (Rosen-Webb, 2011; Woolhouse, 2015; Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017), suggesting there has been little change in the support provided for new professional SENCOs. Importantly, the research adds to the extant literature as voices of newly qualified SENCOs describe current experiences and more nuanced reflections on how their professional identity has developed. Knowing that there are recruitment and retention issues (Dobson and Douglas, 2018) for a role that supports vulnerable children in our schools, it is right that action is taken to address this now.

This research afforded me the privilege of developing a wider understanding of how the professional identity of a newly qualified SENCO evolves in ways that are both common and distinct (Layton, 2005; Qureshi, 2014). SENCOs must be qualified teachers (DfE/DoH, 2015), and participants in this study stressed the importance of having significant experience to support colleagues, alongside competent leadership and communication skills. They describe how having (or not having) these skills, alongside other characteristics they had identified as supportive, impacted on how they were perceived by others, and their confidence, ultimately affecting the development of their professional identity. This has significant implications for those who are recruiting to the post in order to appoint someone with the appropriate skill set or to have awareness of skills that will need to be developed.

The role is known to be varied (Hallett and Hallett, 2010;2017) but participants added to this by articulating their surprise at the breadth and depth of the role (Dobson and Douglas, 2018). Given that most participants had been asked to take on the role rather than choosing this career path (albeit a positive experience for most of them), this suggests that the surprise could add to retention issues. While all staff should be familiar with the CoP (DfE/DoH, 2015) the findings suggest that all school staff, including senior leaders and governors, and other associated public service professionals e.g. allied health, social workers, police, need a greater awareness of the SENCO role.

This would be aided by improved clarity of the role and less local interpretation (Cheminais, 2015). Furthermore, through raising awareness, there should be greater support for those who are new to role and more career opportunities across the education workforce to enable aspiring SENCOs.

This study reinforces the emotional impact of the role which was felt most keenly and unexpectedly by those holding leadership roles. At times sharing their experiences was challenging, particularly when it was perceived that their views conflicted with those of their setting, or the leadership team; this resulted in feelings of isolation, tension, or discomfort at the possibility of seeming disloyal. More formalised support is required to protect SENCOs emotional wellbeing through supervision (Reid and Soan, 2018), coaching and mentoring (Cheminais, 2015; Ballantyne and Zhukov, 2017).

While the need for training and induction into the role have been discussed in policy and research, participants continued to highlight variability in the provision of this. Trede (2012) stated that leaving induction to chance was risky and yet, this study has shown that only two of the seven participants had opportunity to shadow a colleague before their appointment; this was the most positive form of induction shared. Additionally, the interviews highlighted that no systematic approach (Robertson, 2012) had been used to identify and address newly qualified SENCOs' support needs. Given their early stage of development within the role, this is surprising as they cannot know what they do not know! Furthermore, the importance of local networks (Griffiths and Dubsy, 2012) to support all SENCOs was significant alongside coaching and mentoring from experienced colleagues. Participants highlighted a distinction between having the trust and support of the headteacher and their ability to enhance knowledge and skills, while the benefits of Local Authority meetings and NASC course were noted alongside clear insights into barriers experienced. With many findings given by those in the early stages of their professional journey, and building on previous research, it is vital that induction is carefully planned in terms of what will be included, who will support this and when it will commence, including learning or experiences to enhance SEN knowledge and wider leadership/ whole-school skills. Training needs for continued professional development should be identified, supported, and monitored through strategic systems to support induction and retention in the role to aid the development of professional identity. Schools, local authorities and NASC providers need to consider the voice of newly qualified SENCOs to make adaptations and advancements to their support.

Overt connections between professional identity and local or national policies and wider world views were not made during this study, apart from job descriptions, the school's SEN policy and the CoP (DfE/DoH, 2015). Through considering more implicit comments within the interviews, some tensions were seen which were impacting on the SENCO and development of their professional identity

(Cheminais, 2015; Hellowell, 2018). Consideration, at local and national level, needs to be given when new policies or guidance are being introduced to ensure that there is a clear understanding of how this impacts the role of the SENCO and whole school systems, so that it can be more sympathetically disseminated and implemented effectively.

Concerns about being able to share beliefs (including faith), or tensions created when it was perceived that beliefs or values were not shared with colleagues, had an impact on the participants. Acceptance and embracing difference underpin inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) and yet those at the heart of this, were at times left isolated. Literature speaks of building shared understanding (Ekins, 2015) and creating whole school policies (Ekins and Grimes, 2009), but little is written about how to mitigate tensions when there is disparity of views. Comments by two participants suggests that greater transparency is required about how faith-based beliefs should be shared, as this was seen to have an impact on their professional identities. Taking the time to reflect and share beliefs and wider world views may support shared understanding which can further enhance professional identity development, although this may need to be carefully managed by school leaders, teacher training providers and policy makers.

The newly qualified SENCOs articulated factors that strengthened or impeded the development of their professional identity, in some cases showing more nuanced understanding than existing literature which I believe was linked to both the method of semi-structured interviews and the study being undertaken by an independent researcher. I have visualised this contribution to knowledge (Figure 5) through adapting my original conceptual understanding from literature.

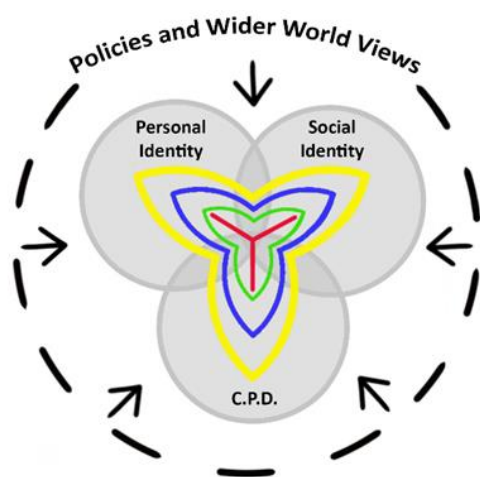


Figure 1

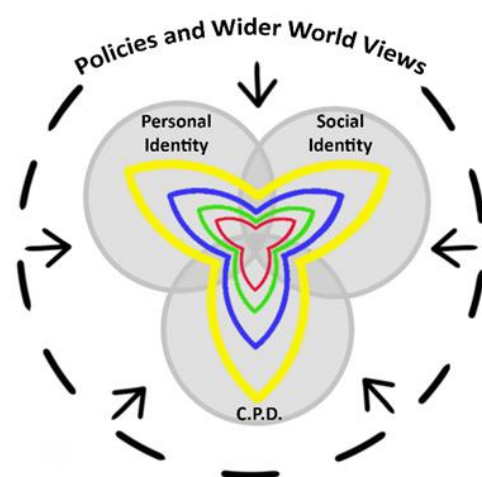


Figure 5

### **7.3 Future research possibilities**

While making new contributions to discussions about professional identity and the role of the SENCo, this was only a very small-scale study. Further research is needed to establish whether newly qualified SENCos from a wider range of local authorities or those with a greater length of service experience their professional identity in a similar way.

Having highlighted issues relating to induction and training, it would be interesting to develop and monitor an early support or induction package, or a support programme for SENCos who have been in post for a couple of years so that they can continue to develop and remain in the profession. Integral to this would be developing a system for identifying training needs and monitoring provision of support to enhance CPD opportunities, which could be used more widely across the workforce.

While this study includes participants from three local authorities and shows that their external support is similar, it would be useful to consider how newly qualified and experienced SENCos are supported in other local authorities with potentially different demographics.

With growing numbers of pupils supported in independent schools (ISC, 2021) research into support and guidance available to SENCos in those settings will help to meet the needs of those pupils and help stabilise another area of the workforce.

### **7.4 Reflection on the research approach**

Through using IPA, it was possible to listen to the individual experiences of the SENCos without pre-supposition about what the research may yield. A thorough cycle of analysis supported me in understanding the meaning of, and behind the words spoken (or unspoken). While only a small purposive sample, the experiences of SENCos working across the primary and secondary phases was heard, providing detailed, contextualised accounts of their developing professional identities.

The very nature of IPA is interpretative, using a double hermeneutic of the participant making sense of their experience, before the researcher makes sense of what they have described. While there is the possibility of detail or meaning being 'lost in translation', the careful, iterative process by which analysis occurred aided me through continual reflection on the original scripts. If further clarification of a specific point was required after transcription, this was sought.

If the quality of research is to be judged on validity, it could be argued that the ability to identify common themes across participants helps to validate conclusions that are drawn in this study, particularly given the range of settings and personal influences that will have affected the identities.

I am mindful that, while it has been possible to identify factors that constitute and affect the professional development of newly qualified SENCo's, these views expressed by participants and my interpretations of these may change over time, and therefore, this study reflects a snapshot of people in a particular time and place.

I recognise that recent publications (Smith and Nizza, 2021; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022) have adopted new terminology for superordinate and subordinate themes, now known as Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and Personal Experiential Themes (PETS). As the current research was largely written, I have continued to use previous terminology but from forum discussions understand that the new terminology has been positively experienced.

### **7.5 Reflection of myself as a researcher**

IPA does not set out to prove a hypothesis nor to generate a new theory, but to understand the lived experiences of those involved in the study. I used a pilot phase to enable testing of research questions to ensure that they were as open as possible, transcribing data myself to begin the process of understanding what had been said and hermeneutic circles of analysis to ensure that understanding was grounded in the data. I found the process of self-reflection and discussion with my supervisors essential to pick up on small utterances. I decided to present two chapters for my findings, firstly individual experiences (Chapter 4) and then themes that emerged (chapter 5) as I felt that this provided a greater sense of understanding. For this research, I made a conscious decision to focus only on the perception of the newly qualified SENCo's. I am aware that other stakeholders may have different (or similar) perceptions which may complement this research, but an idiographic group was chosen for this study.

IPA was a new research approach for me although it sat comfortably with my personal and professional experiences making the most of my inquiring mind through direct interaction with participants, reflectivity and discussions with my peers and supervisors. In addition to the impact for supporting the development of SENCo professional identity, the skills learned will also impact on my own consultancy and training roles.

I began this research due to a concern about what felt like a revolving door of SENCo's entering and leaving the role. I feel privileged that the participants of this study gave me an opportunity to understand possible reasons for this through their perceptions of how they experience and understand their professional identity. This provides opportunities for schools, local authorities, and academic institutions to consider how practice can be adapted or supported to ensure that pupils with SEN receive the best support possible and SENCo's feel valued within their role.

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**Appendix 1****Participant consent form and information sheet****PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

**Title of Project:** An exploration of how newly qualified school SENCo's  
perceive their professional identity.

**Name of Researcher:** Elizabeth (Liz) Harby

**Contact details:**

**Address:** Canterbury Christ Church University  
North Holmes Road  
Canterbury  
Kent, CT1 1QU

**Tel:**

**Email:** e.j.harby36@canterbury.ac.uk

**Please initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I understand and consent to interviews being audio-recorded.
4. I understand that any personal information that I provide to the researchers will be kept strictly confidential.
5. I agree to take part in the above study.


-----  
Name of Participant

-----  
Date

-----  
Signature

-----  
Researcher

-----  
Date

-----  
Signature

## **An exploration of how newly qualified school SENCo's perceive their professional identity.**

### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

This research study is being conducted at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) by Elizabeth Harby as part of an EdD degree in SEN and Inclusion and to inform future educational practice for professional identity, recruitment and sustaining the workforce.

#### **Background**

The mandatory completion of the National Award for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator's (NASC) was introduced in 2009 to support the development of SENCo's knowledge and expertise. There has been research into the role of the SENCo, but very little of this considers the perspectives of those carrying out the role. There has been some research linked to the NASC, but these focused more on whether the outcomes of the course had been met, rather than a longer term impact study.

This study seeks to understand how newly qualified SENCo's perceive their professional identity and whether or not there is a need for additional support from within or beyond their school.

#### **What will you be required to do?**

Participants in this study will be required to complete an initial questionnaire. From this a small sample will be invited to participate in two individual interviews, approximately 6 months apart. Participants will also be invited to keep a simple log of significant thoughts or events to act as an aide memoir for discussions. Participants will be invited to attend one focus group meeting to share thoughts and explore themes that have begun to emerge from the interviews.

#### **To participate in this research you must:**

Be a newly qualified (within 6 months of completing NASC) SENCo who works in a school and has been in role for at least 1 year.

#### **Procedures**

You will be asked to complete an initial questionnaire which will include demographic questions and additional questions to gain a better understanding of your specific role. This should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete. This will also invite participants to take part in the interview process.

A group of participants will be selected from the initial sample and individuals will be invited to an interview with the researcher in February 2017, with a follow up interview in summer

2017. Questions will be sent to participants in advance of the meetings to allow time to reflect and prepare. Discussion or advice on diarizing or logging significant thoughts or events will be given to participants to support accurate recall during the interview process.

Participants will be invited to attend one focus group meeting to enable further discussion of key themes that have emerged from the interviews.

All interviews and focus group discussions will be audio-recorded to allow direct transcription for analysis. Should any information be shared which is detrimental to the participant, their setting or is not of a professional nature, this will not be included in the data.

### **Feedback**

Participants will be offered the opportunity to review the transcription within a month of the interview and prior to analysis. As part of the analysis process, the researcher may need to contact participants to ensure correct interpretation of their views.

A full, publically accessible doctoral thesis will be published on the University's Institution Repository (CReaTE) at <http://create.canterbury.ac.uk/> in mid-2018.

### **Confidentiality**

All data and personal information will be stored securely within CCCU premises in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and the University's own data protection requirements. Data can only be accessed by Elizabeth Harby. After completion of the study, all data will be made anonymous (i.e. all personal information associated with the data will be removed).

Through the process of checking accuracy of transcription and discussion of interpretation you will also be asked to consider whether there are details that you would like changed or removed from the interview or to further protect your identity.

Audio files will be deleted once the participant has had the opportunity to review the transcript.

### **Dissemination of results**

The research will be used to produce a thesis during mid-2018, which will be uploaded onto the University's Institution Repository (CReaTE). I will use findings to inform future educational professional practice, including professional development and support. I will seek opportunities to share the findings through seminars, conferences and publications.

### **Deciding whether to participate**

If you have any questions or concerns about the nature, procedures or requirements for participation do not hesitate to contact me. Should you decide to participate, you will be free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason.

## Appendix 2

### Initial questionnaire

#### PURPOSE OF THIS SURVEY

This survey is being carried out by Elizabeth Harby as part of her research towards a Doctorate (EdD) with Canterbury Christ Church University. The survey is to identify a group of newly qualified SENCo's to participate in 1:1 semi-structured interviews to explore perceptions of their role.

#### WHO CAN TAKE THE SURVEY?

Any SENCo working in a school who has completed the NASC Award.

#### HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

This questionnaire should take no more than 10 minutes to complete.

1. Please indicate your age group:

21-30

31-40

41-50

51-60

Over 60

2. Please indicate your gender:

Male

Female

3. Please indicate if you have a disability:

No

Yes: please provide brief details of the nature of the disability and any special requirements that you may have.

4. What was your first degree?

5. When did you complete your first degree?

6. When did you begin teaching?

7. How many years of teaching experience do you have?

8. What was your route into teaching?

PGCE

Bachelor of Education or BA/BSC with QTS

Teach first

Graduate Teacher Programme

Other (please state):

9. Have you taught in any settings other than your current placement?

No

Yes

If yes, please highlight all settings that are applicable:

Nursery; Primary; Secondary; Higher Education; Further Education

10. Have you taught in an independent school?

Yes

No

11. Have you taught abroad?

No

Yes: please state where and for how long:

12. Please indicate the setting in which you currently work:

Primary

Secondary

College/ 6<sup>th</sup> form

Special school/ Pupil Referral Unit

Other (please state):

13. Please indicate your job title within your setting:

Head teacher

Deputy Head teacher

Assistant Head teacher

SENCo

Inclusion Leader

Other (please state):

14. Please indicate how long have you held this post:

Under 1 year

1-2 year

2-5 years

5-10 years

Over 10 years

15. When did you complete the NASENCo Award?

16. Have you held the role of SENCo in any other schools?

Yes

No

17. Please indicate whether you work full or part time:

Full time

Part-time: Please state how many days you work:

18. Please indicate how much SENCo time you have in school:

- 5 days
- 4 days
- 3 days
- 2 days
- 1 day
- 0.5 day
- Other (please state):

19. Please indicate the number of pupils at your school:

- 100-200
- 200-400
- 400-600
- 600-1000
- Over 1000

20. Please indicate if you are on the leadership team:

- Senior leadership team
- Middle leadership team
- Not on leadership team

21. In your current post, please indicate your main responsibilities:

- SENCo
- Class teacher
- SEN teacher
- Pupil Premium
- Child Protection
- Other (please state):

22. Do you have responsibility for the line management of other members of staff?

- No
- Yes

If you answered yes, please indicate how many staff you line manage:

23. What other postgraduate or specialist qualifications do you hold?

24. When did you become a SENCo?

25. Have you had other careers prior to teaching? If so, please state:

26. Do you know people with SEN in your private life?

- Yes
- No

27. Did you enter teaching with the intention of becoming a SENCo?

Yes

No

28. Please briefly explain why you became a SENCo:

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. If you would be happy to participate in the interviews, please can you add your name and contact details below; this information will be removed prior to data analysis to anonymise the questionnaire.

Name:

Contact telephone number:

Contact email address:

## Appendix 3

### Pilot Interview schedule

No	Question	Prompts
1	What are the main activities that you do as SENCo?	Examples Are these daily, regular, occasional?
2	Which activities do you find easiest/ most rewarding	Type of activity Reasons for finding them easy/ rewarding
3	Which activities do you find most difficult/ least rewarding?	Type of activity Reason for finding them difficult/least rewarding?
4	Are there aspects of the role that you feel you have been unable to undertake/ be effective in?	What would you have liked to do/ be more effective in? Why do you feel that this has not been the case? What might need to change to enable this?
5	What do you feel that you have done that has made the biggest difference since becoming SENCo?	What is it? What difference do you think it made? What evidence is there to support this?
6	How do you perceive your professional role?	What is your professional role? How would you describe yourself? Teacher, SENCo, Manager? If you were SENCo for a while before completing the NASENCo Award, do you feel your perception has changed since completion?
7	How do you think other people see your role?	Do you think other staff within school have similar perceptions of the role? Do you think parents/ children and young people have a similar perception of the role? Do you think other professionals have similar perceptions of the role?
8	Have you needed to undertake further training for any aspects of the SENCo role?	What type of training? Why did you feel in necessary? How long did the training take to complete? Has it helped?
9	Are you part of any SENCo networks/ support groups?	In Bexley, as part of an academy chain, professional membership, contact with people who did the course, Online forums
10	Do you have access to support within or outside school?	What type of support? Who provides support? How useful has this been?
11	Are there aspects of the role with which you feel that more support is required?	What aspects of the role? What type of support is needed? How often? Who would be best placed to provide support?
12	Do you have specific tasks that you would like to achieve over the next year?	What are they? For yourself/ for the school/pupils? Have you got a timescale for working on them? Is there support in school/beyond to help with this? Have you any concerns about developing this area? How do you find your workload/work-life balance?
13	Did you choose the SENCo career path from the outset of your career?	Reasons why you did or didn't? What led you to becoming a SENCo?
14	To what extent has the role of SENCo been what you expected it to be?	What did you think it would be like before you started? Have things turned out as you expected?
15	Do you see yourself staying in the SENCo role for the foreseeable future?	If yes, what are you looking forward to/ what are your reasons for staying? If not, are you happy to share reasons for change?
16	Would you recommend the role of SENCo to a colleague who was interested?	Reasons for or against recommending the role
17	Is there anything else that you would like to share about how you perceive the role of SENCo and support that you receive or require?	



## Appendix 4

### First Interview Schedule

#### Interview schedule for researcher

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this discussion to allow me to better understand how newly qualified SENCo's perceive their roles. This schedule is to allow a semi-structure for our discussions, but there will be opportunity for you to share other experiences as you feel appropriate.

No	Question	Prompts
1	What is your professional identity?	Who are you professionally?
2	When we talk about professional identity, what do you understand by that term?	Is identity based on role, beliefs, attitudes, professional boundaries with other professionals? Something else?
3	What professional role do you identify with?	Cards for participants to choose from. Ask participants to place them in order of what is their highest priority. Discussion about order – why have you placed teacher/ SENCo/ Snr leader etc. in that order?
4	How is the SENCo role defining your professional identity?	
5	What has helped you to develop your professional identity?	People or situations in school? Professional relationships with other SENCo's/ agencies? Completion of NASC? Views of parents?
6	How do you think other people see your role?	Are similar perceptions of your role held by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colleagues in school</li> <li>• School governors</li> <li>• Parents</li> <li>• Children and young people</li> <li>• Other professionals</li> </ul>
7	Have you needed to undertake further training to help develop your professional identity?	What type of training? Why did you feel in necessary? How long did the training take to complete? Has it helped? Is there any additional or further training that you think you need?
8	When you took on this role, has your professional identity turned out as you expected it to be?	What did you think it would be like before you started? Have things turned out as you expected? Has anything been a surprise? Are there any conflicts?
9	Is this a professional role that you would recommend to others?	Try to elicit reasons for or against.
10	Is there anything else that you would like to share about how you perceive the role of SENCo and support that you receive or require?	

**Interview schedule for participant**

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this discussion to allow me to better understand how newly qualified SENCo's perceive their roles. This schedule is to allow a semi-structure for our discussions, but there will be opportunity for you to share other experiences as you feel appropriate.

No	Question	Thoughts/ interview preparation notes
1	What is your professional identity?	
2	When we talk about professional identity, what do you understand by that term?	
3	What professional role do you identify with?	
4	How is the SENCo role defining your professional identity?	
5	What has helped you to develop your professional identity?	
6	How do you think other people see your role?	
7	Have you needed to undertake further training to help develop your professional identity?	
8	When you took on this role, has your professional identity turned out as you expected it to be?	
9	Is this a professional role that you would recommend to others?	
10	Is there anything else that you would like to share about how you perceive the role of SENCo and support that you receive or require?	

## Appendix 5

### Second Interview Schedule

1. Ibarra (1999) and Schein (1978) considered professional identity as one's own professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences. Show doctor picture – who are they? How do you know? What is their professional identity?
2. Ask Participants to define their own professional identity in relation to these – either discussion or spider diagram to complete.

Attributes	Beliefs	Values	Motives	Experiences

3. If this is your SENCo professional identity, do you think this would be the same for other SENCo's?
4. Is it generic or institutional?

Is it possible to develop a generic identity?

What factors affect it?

Are there features that are generic and then additional institutional ones? (Could annotate on spider diagram.)

5. Would your professional identity change if you moved school? By how much?
6. How secure do you feel your professional identity is?
7. What has helped you to feel secure?
8. What else has affected how secure you feel?
9. How supported do you feel by leadership?
10. How effective was your induction to the role?
11. How well do you feel your role is understood by others in your school?
12. How well do you feel your role is understood by external professionals?
13. How well connected do you feel to other SENCo's?

14. Do you feel that the SENCo role impacts you emotionally? (Positive or negative?)
15. How do you rate the quantity of CPD you have accessed since taking on the role?
16. How do you rate the quality of CPD that you have accessed since taking on the role?
17. How important do you feel that professional identity is to the role and why?
18. What policies are there in school/ local/ national that mention/affect the professional identity of the SENCo?
19. How do you relate to these documents? – reflection/conflict
20. Have you had any experiences that have affected your perception of your professional identity since the last interview?
21. Is there any link between professional identity and recruitment and retention?

## Appendix 5

### Steps for analysis

**Step 1:** The initial transcript (below) containing all audible information and additional non-verbal behaviours was read several times to allow immersion in what the participant was saying. This transcription contained all spoken information, with no attempt to correct grammar, so that subsequent analysis was derived from the most accurate record of the interviews (Smith *et al*, 2009). Occasionally, individual words were not clearly audible; where this occurred, or if a passage appeared not to make sense, it was sent to or discussed with the participant so that they could validate what had been said (Grbich, 1999).

#### Initial transcript

[Researcher]: What do you think has helped to develop your sense of professional identity, so you are a SENCo, what has made that for you?

[Participant name]: [Long pause] Expectations of other people, I think in what other people are expecting me to do in part, and in part what I think I should be doing. They don't always agree and it's joining the two together, so that I'm doing what I think I should be doing, but also doing what the school think I should be doing.

**Step 2:** All transcripts were anonymised by assigning pseudonyms for each participant; these were derived in order that the interviews were held so that the first participant was named Claire, the second, David etc (the first two letters having been assigned to the pilot participants). This allowed the researcher to follow the 'story' of an individual participant through the research. Additionally, all other identifiers, such as school name or those of other professionals were removed and substituted by a note of the missing category, for example [LA specialist teacher]. Content was checked with participants to ensure accuracy.

#### Example of anonymised transcript

G: Yes, so in the Local Authority, we have the Local Offer which we then have to show on our website how we are supporting that Local offer. So here a group of SENCo's sat together and did it as a working party together and decided what to include – I wasn't part of that actually because it was before I became the SENCo, but basically to show how we in [LA] meet the Local Offer. There are also some organisations on there like Family Support in [town] that have been really good.

**Step 3:** The validated, anonymised transcripts were copied into IPA format for analysis using the principles outlined by Smith (1996), Smith and Osborn (2003), Smith *et al* (2009) and Langdridge (2007).

**Step 4:** 1<sup>st</sup> Hermeneutic analysis: The left-hand column was used to note anything interesting (exploratory comments or observations), and no attempt was made to produce themes. Annotations included paraphrases, questions or associations and comment on the use of language. As these progressed through the transcript, contradictions or amplifications of previous thoughts were also noted. Smith et al (2009) note the importance of re-reading and close analysis to ensure that the researcher is 'engaging with the transcript' (ibid, p83). This was the most time-consuming element of analysis as I became immersed in the data and began to highlight words or phrases that seemed important and noted lines of inquiry.

**Step 5:** 2<sup>nd</sup> hermeneutic analysis: The right-hand column was used to document emerging themes using phrases or words that were grounded in the data, but that allowed connections within the transcript to be made. This was a challenging task, as if the notations were too concise it became hard to make connections later in the transcript, but if they remained detailed, they appeared to be merely a replication of the left-hand column.

#### Example of annotated transcript

Responsibility of role	F: I was aware that I was responsible for the most vulnerable children that we have,	Challenge –
Frustration when responsibility shirked	and I got a lot more frustrated with teachers who didn't take their role seriously. I had	<u>responsibility;</u>
Empathy for parents	a lot of dealing with families who were going through a lot of upset, for some parents,	
Emotional impact on herself	it's like they're going through a grieving process, like with an unexpected diagnosis of something. It's very difficult and I think I took a lot of that on board.	emotional toll
	L: And did you have ways of, like if you worked in social services you might have daily supervision, did you have any either formal or informal thing to deal with some of those emotions?	
Support – set it up themselves	F: Not formal, but we used to talk a lot within SLT and with the SENCo group and it was that, and it was something that we established it wasn't something that was there.	Network
Strong, cohesive group. Who invites new	L: And it was quite lucky with the personalities that you had in there, in your group, actually.	
SENCo's? How local or similar types of school?	F: Yes, they're really strong as a group and [replacement SENCo] is very lucky to have them. I am confident that they will look after her.	Network

It was important to consider the whole transcript and not select or omit particular passages so that the analysis reflected the whole description provided by the participants. Having completed this cycle of analysis, the process was repeated on the same transcript to check for additional evidence before following this process with all other interviews.

It has been suggested that once emergent themes have been recognised on the first transcript, these can then be used to analyse the subsequent interviews (Smith and Osborn 2003). It was felt more appropriate to follow the same initial procedure for each transcript to avoid missing new emerging themes, however, while I made every attempt to bracket pre-conceptions, as more transcripts were analysed, I was conscious of 'recognising' familiar themes.

**Step 6:** The next stage was to look for connections between themes. This was achieved by cutting up each line from the individual tables and laying them out in clusters. This allowed movement of some data from one theme to another or reflection that some data sets seemed to be less important and be set to one side.

**Step 7:** The resulting data was collated in a master table which displayed four superordinate themes (Langdridge, 2007) with relevant sub themes (Table 5 in findings). Following Smith et al's (2009) advice, themes were also recorded with transcript evidence (Table of illustrative quotes) so that the reader can see links between the data and the analysis which can then be linked to supporting literature. The inclusion of a theme has been considered based on the richness of the data, not on the prevalence (Smith and Osborn, 2003): As this recommendation was followed a table (below) showing the prevalence of comments across participants has been made purely to show whether a theme was derived on the basis of commonality or a discrete, yet significant comment.

Table of illustrative quotes

Superordinate theme	Subordinate theme	Illustrative quote (Participant; Page: Line)
Impact of relationships on identity	Trust	<p>I have been described as being 'safe' by some kids, one that ended up down [name of local PRU] recently. That was nice to know! Kids that I come into contact with and work through stuff with them or support them with literacy or maths or whatever it is, I would hope that the majority of them would see me as someone who will try and help them, as someone who has tried to put things in place to help them. I think some of them will just know me as someone that they can talk to if they were struggling and other kids, probably at the other end probably won't even know me, they won't have been in touch with our faculty at all. Quite possibly, some of them might see me as the person who is in charge of the kids who aren't so great at school. (David1:12:5-14)</p> <p>it's an open-door policy with our Headteacher, so any things that I suggest and talk through about, she quite often she will trust me enough and my judgement and will say, so let's do that. So, she gives me free-reign a bit, within reason. (Emma2:7:11-14)</p> <p>The head is just very happy to say you know what you're doing, get on with it. If I go to see him and say this needs to happen he will say, 'then it needs to happen'. He's fantastic, really lucky like that. (Fiona1:7:12-14)</p> <p>The fact that my headteacher had complete and utter faith in what I was doing. He had no experience of special needs himself - I didn't when I took it on – but he knew that I went out and I got on every training course going</p>

Participant contribution to themes

Superordinate theme	Subordinate theme	Claire	David	Emma	Fiona	Grace	Holly	Isabel
Impact of relationships	Trust	0	1	1	3	0	0	1
	Support	0	2	4	0	6	0	7
	Understanding and expectations	13	7	11	14	4	0	9
	Isolation	5	0	2	4	1	0	1
	Other tensions	3	2	0	3	0	0	2
Sharing	Of responsibility	0	2	4	3	5	2	4
	Of interest/ focus	1	3	2	1	1	1	1
	Of identity, experience, support	2	6	1	15	6	1	5
Attributes	Strategic/ leadership skills	1	3	8	14	21	14	5
	Communication skills	0	0	2	3	7	0	7
	Operational skills	0	0	0	1	7	2	1
	Emotional intelligence	3	1	3	3	4	1	8
	Demeanour	3	2	4	3	8	7	10
	Faith, beliefs and values	4	1	2	6	5	0	6
Knowledge	Experience	5	2	9	3	2	2	6
	Induction	1	1	1	2	1	0	1
	Training	2	2	4	7	2	1	2
	Desire for new knowledge	2	2	3	1	2	0	2

Step 8: Supervision and discussion with colleagues versed in the use of IPA was used to test and develop the coherence and plausibility of researcher interpretations (Smith *et al*, 2009).



## Appendix 7

### PROPORTIONATE ETHICAL REVIEW (Submitted April 2016; Approved June 2016)

#### ETHICS REVIEW CHECKLIST

Sections A and B of this checklist must be completed for every research or knowledge transfer project that involves human or animal<sup>1</sup> participants. These sections serve as a toolkit that will identify whether a full application for ethics approval needs to be submitted.

If the toolkit shows that there is **no need for a full ethical review**, Sections D, E and F should be completed and the checklist forwarded to the Research Governance Manager as described in Section C.

If the toolkit shows that **a full application is required**, this checklist should be set aside and an *Application for Faculty Research Ethics Committee Approval Form* – or an appropriate external application form – should be completed and submitted. **There is no need to complete both documents.**

Before completing this checklist, please refer to *Ethics Policy for Research Involving Human Participants* in the University Research Governance Handbook.

The principal researcher/project leader (or, where the principal researcher/project leader is a student, their supervisor) is responsible for exercising appropriate professional judgement in this review.

**N.B. This checklist must be completed – and any resulting follow-up action taken – before potential participants are approached to take part in any study.**

Type of Project – please mark (x) as appropriate	
Research	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Knowledge Exchange <input type="checkbox"/>

#### Section A: Applicant Details

A1. Name of applicant:	Elizabeth Harby
A2. Status (please underline):	Undergraduate Student <sup>2</sup> / <u>Postgraduate Student</u> / Staff Member
A3. Email address:	e.j.harby36@canterbury.ac.uk
A4. Contact address:	Canterbury Christ Church University North Holmes Road Canterbury CT1 1QU
A5. Telephone number	

## Section B: Ethics Checklist

Please answer each question by marking (X) in the appropriate box:

		Yes	No
1.	Does the study involve participants who are particularly <u>vulnerable</u> or unable to give informed consent (e.g. children, people with learning disabilities), or in unequal relationships (e.g. people in prison, your own staff or students)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2.	Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to any <u>vulnerable</u> groups or individuals to be recruited (e.g. students at school, members of self-help groups, residents of nursing home)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
3.	Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without usual informed consent procedures having been implemented in advance (e.g. covert observation, certain ethnographic studies)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
4.	Will the study use deliberate deception (this does <u>not</u> include randomly assigning participants to groups in an experimental design)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
5.	Will the study involve discussion of, or collection of information on, topics of a sensitive nature (e.g. sexual activity, drug use) <u>personal to the participants</u> ?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
6.	Are drugs, placebos or other substances (e.g. food substances, vitamins) to be administered to human or animal participants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
7.	Does the study involve invasive or intrusive procedures such as blood taking or muscle biopsy from human or animal participants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
8.	Is physiological stress, pain, or more than mild discomfort to humans or animals likely to result from the study?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
9.	Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences in humans (including the researcher) or animals beyond the risks encountered in normal life?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
10.	Will the study involve <b>interaction</b> with animals? (If you are simply observing them – e.g. in a zoo or in their natural habitat – without having any contact at all, you can answer “No”)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
11.	Will the study involve prolonged or repetitive testing?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
12.	Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
13.	Is the study a survey that involves University-wide recruitment of students from Canterbury Christ Church University?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

14.	Will the study involve recruitment of adult participants (aged 16 and over) who are unable to make decisions for themselves, i.e. lack capacity, and come under the jurisdiction of the Mental Capacity Act (2005)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
15.	Will the study involve recruitment of participants ( <b>excluding staff</b> ) through the NHS?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
16.	Will the study involve recruitment of participants through the <b>Department of Social Services</b> of a Local Authority (e.g. Kent County Council)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Now please assess outcomes and actions by referring to Section C 

### Section C: How to Proceed

C1. If you have answered 'NO' to *all* the questions in Section B, you should complete Sections D-F as appropriate and send the completed and signed Checklist to the Research Governance Manager in the Research and Enterprise Development Centre for the record. **That is all you need to do.** You will receive a letter confirming compliance with University Research Governance procedures.

*[Master's students should retain copies of the form and letter; the letter should be bound into their research report or dissertation. Work that is submitted without this document will be returned un-assessed.]*

C2. If you have answered 'YES' to *any* of the questions in Section B, you will need to describe more fully how you plan to deal with the ethical issues raised by your project. This does not mean that you cannot do the study, only that your proposal will need to be approved by a Research Ethics Committee. **Depending upon which questions you answered 'YES' to, you should proceed as follows**

(a) If you answered 'YES' to any of **questions 1 – 12 ONLY** (i.e. not questions 13, 14, 15 or 16), you will have to submit an application to your Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) using your Faculty's version of the **Application for Faculty Research Ethics Committee Approval Form**. This should be submitted as directed on the form. The **Application for Faculty Research Ethics Committee Approval Form** can be obtained from the Governance and Ethics pages of the Research and Enterprise Development Centre on the University web site.

(b) If you answered 'YES' to **question 13** you have two options:

(i) If you answered 'YES' to **question 13 ONLY** you must send copies of this checklist to the Student Survey Unit. Subject to their approval you may then proceed as at C1 above.

(ii) If you answered 'YES' to **question 13 PLUS any other of questions 1 – 12**, you must proceed as at C2(b)(i) above and then submit an application to your Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) as at C2(a).

(c) If you answered 'YES' to **question 14** you do not need to submit an application to your Faculty Research Ethics Committee. **INSTEAD**, you must submit an application to the appropriate external NHS or Social Care Research Ethics Committee [see C2(d) below].

(d) If you answered 'YES' to **question 15** you do not need to submit an application to your Faculty Research Ethics Committee. **INSTEAD**, you must submit an application to the appropriate external NHS or Social Care Research Ethics Committee (REC), *after* your proposal has received a satisfactory Peer Review (see *Research Governance Handbook*). Applications to an NHS or Social Care REC must be signed by the appropriate Faculty Director of Research or other authorised Faculty signatory before they are submitted.

(e) If you answered 'YES' to **question 16** you do not need to submit an application to your Faculty Research Ethics Committee. **INSTEAD**, you must submit an application to the appropriate external Local Authority REC, *after* your proposal has received a satisfactory Peer Review (see *Research Governance Handbook*). Applications to a Local Authority REC must be signed by the appropriate Faculty Director of Research or other authorised Faculty signatory before they are submitted.

### IMPORTANT

Please note that it is your responsibility in the conduct of your study to follow the policies and procedures set out in the University's Research Governance Handbook, and any relevant academic or professional guidelines. This includes providing appropriate information sheets and consent forms, and ensuring confidentiality in the storage and use of data. Any significant change in the question, design or conduct over the course of the study should be notified to the **Faculty and/or other Research Ethics Committee** that received your original proposal. Depending on the nature of the changes, a new application for ethics approval may be required.

### Section D: Project Details

D1. Project title:	An exploration of how newly qualified mainstream primary school SENCo's in a London Borough Local Authority perceive their professional identity.
D2. Start date	
D3. End date	May 2016 May 2018
D4. Lay summary (max 300 words <i>which <u>must</u> include a brief description of the methodology to be used for gathering your data</i> )	The NASENCo Award is a mandatory qualification aiming to develop SENCo knowledge and expertise. An initial review of literature shows that there is little research into SENCo's perceptions of their role. In the focus Local Authority there has been a 30% turnover of Primary SENCo's in the last year. This research aims to understand how SENCo's perceive their role and whether they feel that the support provided to them is appropriate.  Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will be used to understand participant's views. A minimum of 6 participants will be selected through an initial questionnaire to create a homogenous group of participants. Each participant will then be interviewed twice during their first year following qualification using semi-structured

	interviews and towards the end of this period may meet as a focus group (with their agreement) to explore themes that have begun to emerge. To support participant's recall, they will be asked to diarize some of their experiences to bring with them to the interviews and focus group session. Interviews and focus group discussions will be audio recorded and transcribed to allow coded analysis.
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### Section E1: For Students Only

E1. Module name and number or course and Department:	EdD SEN and Inclusion
E2. Name of Supervisor or module leader	Dr Simon Hayhoe
E3. Email address of Supervisor or Module leader	Simon.hayhoe@canterbury.ac.uk
E4. Contact address:	Canterbury Christ Church University North Homes Road Canterbury Kent CT1 1QU

### Section E2: For Supervisors

*Please tick the appropriate boxes. The study should not begin until all boxes are ticked:*

The student has read the relevant sections of the University's Research Governance Handbook, available on the University web pages at: <a href="http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/centres/red/ethics-governance/governance-and-ethics.asp">http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/centres/red/ethics-governance/governance-and-ethics.asp</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The topic merits further investigation	<input type="checkbox"/>
The student has the skills to carry out the study	<input type="checkbox"/>
The participant information sheet or leaflet is appropriate	<input type="checkbox"/>
The procedures for recruitment and obtaining informed consent are appropriate	<input type="checkbox"/>

If a Disclosure & Barring Service (DBS) check is required, this has been carried out

Comments from supervisor:

## Section F: Signatures

- I certify that the information in this form is accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief and I take full responsibility for it.
- I certify that a risk assessment for this study has been carried out in compliance with the University's Health and Safety policy.
- I certify that any required Disclosure & Barring Service (DBS) check has been carried out.
- I undertake to carry out this project under the terms specified in the Canterbury Christ Church University Research Governance Handbook.
- I undertake to inform the relevant Faculty Research Ethics Committee of any significant change in the question, design or conduct of the study over the course of the study. I understand that such changes may require a new application for ethics approval.
- I undertake to inform the Research Governance Manager in the Research and Enterprise Development Centre when the proposed study has been completed.
- I am aware of my responsibility to comply with the requirements of the law and appropriate University guidelines relating to the security and confidentiality of participant or other personal data.
- I understand that project records/data may be subject to inspection for audit purposes if required in future and that project records should be kept securely for five years or other specified period.
- I understand that the personal data about me contained in this application will be held by the Research and Enterprise Development Centre and that this will be managed according to the principles established in the Data Protection Act.

As the Principal Investigator for this study, I confirm that this application has been shared with all other members of the study team

(please tick)

✓

Principal Investigator

Supervisor or module leader (as appropriate)

Name: Elizabeth Harby Date: 29.4.16	Name: Date:
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### Section G: Submission

This form should be returned, as an attachment to a covering email, to the Research Governance Manager at [roger.bone@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:roger.bone@canterbury.ac.uk)

**N.B. YOU MUST** include copies of the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form that you will be using in your study (Model versions on which to base these are appended below for your convenience). Also copies of any data gathering tools such as questionnaires, and a **COMPLETED RISK ASSESSMENT FORM**.

Providing the covering email is from a verifiable address, there is no longer a need to submit a signed hard copy version.

## Appendix 8

Full Ethics form (completed for reflection on practicalities with supervisors)

### Education Faculty Research Ethics Review

### Application for full review

For Faculty Office use only

FREC Protocol No:

Date received:

Your application **must** comprise the following documents (please tick the boxes below to indicate that they are attached):

*Application Form*


*Peer Review Form*

**Copies of any documents to be used in the study:**

*Participant Information Sheet(s)*

*Consent Form(s)*

*Introductory letter(s)*

*Questionnaire*

*Focus Group Guidelines*




## Education Faculty Research Ethics Review

### Application for full review

#### 1 PROJECT DETAILS

MAIN RESEARCHER	Elizabeth Harby
E-MAIL	e.j.harby36@canterbury.ac.uk
POSITION WITHIN CCCU	Doctoral student
POSITION OUTSIDE CCCU	Independent SEN Consultant
COURSE (students only)	EdD SEN and Inclusion
DEPARTMENT (staff only)	
PROJECT TITLE	An exploration of how newly qualified SENCo's in schools perceive their professional identity.
TUTOR/SUPERVISOR: NAME	Sue Soan; Alison Ekins
TUTOR/SUPERVISOR: E-MAIL	Sue.soan@canterbury.ac.uk; alison.ekins@canterbury.ac.uk
DURATION OF PROJECT (start & end dates)	May 2016- May 2018

OTHER RESEARCHERS	
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#### 2. OUTLINE THE ETHICAL ISSUES THAT YOU THINK ARE INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT.

Consideration of ethical issues in research generally and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) more specifically have led to the following conclusions for this project, set out under the four main headings from BERA (2011):

##### **Responsibilities to Participants**

Underpinning all ethical considerations is the need for respect for all participants (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012), for them to be 'treated fairly, sensitively, with dignity and with an ethic of respect and freedom from prejudice' (BERA, 2011:5). This encompasses

- Voluntary informed consent – potential participants will be provided with a participant information sheet outlining the nature of the research, requirements of participants and a description of procedures that will be used. Steps will be taken to ensure that participants agree to take part voluntarily and are not coerced or feel that it is expected of them by the researcher, school management, or peers. Informed consent will be revisited before each interview, and when checking content of transcripts and analysis with participants.

As Anderson (1998) suggested, participants should be volunteers who have not been placed under pressure, coerced and are not expecting reward or additional support as a result of their involvement. I have been a SENCo and have professionally supported SENCo's for the last 6 years, including potential participants. Initial approach to participants was made while working within a Local Authority (LA), but every effort was made to help them understand that the purpose of the research was for my interest, not on behalf of the LA. Subsequently, I have left the LA and my recruitment of participants has been made to SENCo's over a wider geographical area, many of whom would have no prior relationship with me.

- The nature of IPA is that it rests with exploring participant's perceptions and as such there is no issue regarding openness or deception. IPA often includes pre-presentation of the interview schedule or at least an overview of what topics will be discussed, to the participant, so that they understand the area of discussion that may arise in advance of the interview (Smith et al, 2009, p53; Langdridge, 2007 p62). Research should only begin following consent and only information provided by the participant is analysed, that is data does not include other knowledge about the participant nor any assumptions by the researcher. (Langdridge, 2007; Smith et al, 2009). It is important that an open and clear rationale for research and knowledge of audio recordings is made so that there is no deception on the part of the researcher (Anderson, 1998, p20). To ensure that participants views are recorded and analyses, not interpreted, IPA makes use of 'bracketing' which helps to 'write out' researcher bias. (Smith et al, 2009)

- All participants have the right to withdraw, or to request that information be altered or omitted, for example when they check transcripts or discuss how the researcher has interpreted their views. (Langdridge, 2007; Smith et al, 2009) I have written this within the voluntary consent form and will be reiterating it at each meeting to ensure that all participants are clear about their rights.
- No children or vulnerable young people or adults are involved in this research- this decision was made as participants are adults who are currently involved in a professional role, and the discussion is about this role, so I feel that they are competent to participate.
- No financial or other rewards are being offered through involvement with this research. It will be made clear to participants that their involvement does not mean they will be given additional support as a result of this research. The only perceived incentive could be the opportunity for newly qualified SENCo's to have their views listened to.
- There is no specific detriment expected as a result of participation in this study, however the researcher will be aware of possible distress or discomfort that participants may display and will 'take all necessary steps to reduce the sense of intrusion and to put them at their ease' (BERA, 2011:7). This could include a temporary or permanent cessation of the interview or advice to the participant to seek support from an appropriate source. A 'code of conduct' protocol will be provided to the participant outlining steps that may be taken, should either the participant or researcher feel that these are necessary.

Due to the busy nature of the role, the researcher will seek to minimise bureaucracy and time spent on interviews. This seeks to offer a level of reciprocity for their time were no other incentive is available (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012)

Langdridge (2007) suggests that IPA is very unlikely to result in any physical harm and that while complying with BERA guidelines to ensure that no mental harm occurs, this can be tricky to measure. Smith et al (2009) concur that the extent of 'harm' is difficult to measure. Care and sensitivity will be taken when working with participants to ensure that they do not find discussions difficult or embarrassing and all will have been sent an interview schedule in advance and I will reaffirm their voluntary consent before starting each interview. Smith et al (2009) suggest that a sustained reflection and review of the research helps to minimise discomfort or harm – this may be aided by me using a research reflective diary or record of notes. These may be used to record thoughts during an interview or focus group session or afterwards and would be based on my own reflections or observation, rather than the formal analysis of data. They should include a focus on the participants (and my own) wellbeing, with any concerns being followed up through the Code of conduct protocol.

Anderson (1998) refers to potential benefits outweighing risks to individual participants – the rationale for this research began with a high turnover of Primary school SENCo's in a Local Authority. This research seeks to understand how SENCo's perceive their role. I hope that recommendations from my research may provide additional evidence to support and sustain the recruitment and retention on SENCo's.

- Privacy can include confidentiality and anonymity. In the case of this research I am gathering the views of SENCo's, so their 'voice' cannot be confidential, however, all data will be anonymised, such that no individual or institution will be identifiable on published material or to anyone other than the researcher. In some research methods, all data can be anonymised, but due to the ongoing interactions of the researcher and participant it would be expected that the researcher will retain knowledge of some individual's responses. (Langdridge, 2007; Smith et al, 2009). Compliance with the Data Protection Act(1998) and the universities guidance on storage of data will be upheld. Data will be stored securely and can only be accessed by the researcher. After completion of the study, all data will be anonymised. Participant review of transcripts will allow participants to request removal or alteration of data, and all audio files will be destroyed once they have been transcribed and reviewed.

No data will be collected about the participant without their knowledge.

- A disclosure could refer to confided information that suggests harm to the participant or others or breaks the professional code of conduct. Depending on the nature or severity of the disclosure, the interview should be temporarily stopped, roles and purpose of interview restated before interview continues, or interview ceased. If the

disclosure is of a serious nature, it should be recorded by the researcher and then discussed with supervisor and appropriate actions agreed, recorded and acted upon, following the code of conduct protocol.

#### **Responsibility to Sponsors of Research**

This research is not funded or commissioned by any parties. The research methods have been researched and selected on the basis of their merit for the purpose of this research and following consideration of other methods. I feel competent to carry out the chosen methods and will carry out a pilot study to check the strength of the questionnaire and interview schedule. The methods chosen have proven reliability and validity within other studies using IPA (Dixon et al, 2012; Denovan and Macaskill, 2013; Docherty, 2014) , and every opportunity will be taken to ensure the strength of evidence in this project. Following BERA Guidelines (2011) the research will be published or placed in the public domain.

#### **Responsibilities to the Community of Educational Researchers**

The research will be carried out to the highest standards, as described by BERA guidelines so as not to bring into disrepute the institution or profession which I represent. Anyone making substantive contributions to the research will be acknowledged.

#### **Responsibilities to Educational Professionals, Policy Makers and the general public**

The research report will be written in suitable language and communicated with education professionals, policy makers or the wider public as appropriate based on the outcomes of the findings.

3. GIVE A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE PROJECT in no more than 100 words. (*Include, for example, sample selection, recruitment procedures, data collection, data analysis and expected outcomes.*) Please ensure that your description will be understood by the lay members of the Committee.

An initial review of literature shows that there is little research into SENCo's perceptions of their role. This research aims to understand how SENCo's perceive their role and whether they feel that the support provided to them is appropriate.

Sample selection and recruitment procedures:

- Pilot phase: Project outline to be shared with SENCo's in one LA at SENCo forum and NASC meeting. Expressions of interest invited, after which participant information sheet, initial questionnaire followed by consent form and interview schedule to those meeting criteria (\*Completed NASC within 6 months, working in a school as SENCo for a least 1 year). Up to 4 people to be selected.
- Main phase: Email to be sent to NASC cohorts completing in Nov 2016-Jan 2017 with participant information sheet and initial questionnaire. When 8 SENCo's meet the criteria (above\*), recruitment will cease and participants will be sent consent form and interview schedule.

Methodology: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will be used to understand participant's views. Methods to be used include a semi-structured interview and focus group discussion. To support participant's recall, they will be asked to diarize some of their experiences to bring with them to the interviews and focus group session. Interviews and focus group discussions will be audio recorded and transcribed to allow coded analysis.

Research stage	Activity	Date
Pilot phase	Recruitment of participants to pilot phase Pilot interviews Reflection	May 2016 July 2016 October 2016
Pilot phase 2	2 further pilot interviews based on reviewed interview schedule Reflection	January 2017 February 2017
Main phase: Recruitment and selection	Email to be sent to NASC Cohorts with participant information sheet and initial questionnaire. Recruitment will cease when 8 participants meet selection criteria	January 2017
Main phase: 1 <sup>st</sup> Interview	Consent form, first interview, transcription reviewed by participants	Feb/ March 2017
	Analysis	April 2017
Main phase: Focus group	Focus group discussion, transcription and review by participants	May 2017
	Analysis	July 2017
Main phase: 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview	Second interview, transcription reviewed by participants	September 2017
	Analysis	October 2017

4. How many participants will be recruited?	4 participants for pilot phase 6-8 participants will be used, as recommended by those who have developed and used IPA, including Langdridge (2007) and Smith et al (2009)
5. Will you be recruiting STAFF or STUDENTS from another faculty?	YES/NO If yes, which Faculty: I will not be using staff or students from another faculty.
6. Will participants include minors, people with learning difficulties or other vulnerable people?	YES/NO If yes, please add details. <b>NO</b> – all participants are adults. They are professionals currently working within schools and are being asked to share their own perceptions, such that they are not deemed vulnerable.

7. Potential risks for participants: - Emotional harm/hurt* - Physical harm/hurt - Risk of disclosure - Other (please specify)  *Please note that this includes any sensitive areas, feelings etc., however mild they may seem.	Please indicate all those that apply. <b>NO</b> <b>NO</b> <b>NO</b>  Using the definition of no risk above risks encountered in normal life, the above answers are no, but in the fuller description of ethical considerations, and understanding of potential risks is given. (Section 2)
8. How are these risks to be addressed?	As discussed in Section 2, including informed voluntary consent, use of Code of conduct protocols, right of participants to withdraw, anonymity of data (including review of transcripts by participants), data protection procedures. Throughout the process, I will maintain a reflective approach, including consideration of participant and researcher well-being.
9. Potential benefits for participants: - Improved services  - Improved participant understanding	Please indicate all those that apply. YES – this may be an outcome, but is not the purpose of the research

<p>- Opportunities for participants to have their views heard. - Other (please specify)</p>	<p><b>YES</b> - of their own views, and how they compare with others <b>YES</b></p> <p>Participant reflections and contributions to discussions may help to improve or change services both within or across settings through sharing of views. Feedback may empower SENCo's to understand how their views match or differ from the wider group of participants to help support the need for change/ to maintain the status quo.</p>
<p>10. How, when and by whom will participants be approached? Will they be recruited individually or en bloc?</p>	<p>Pilot phase: Initial approach to explain research at NASC course meeting and SENCo forum in one LA. Subsequent email inviting those who have shown an interest to complete initial questionnaire. (May 2016) Main phase: Email to be sent to NASC Cohorts with participant information sheet and initial questionnaire. Recruitment will cease when 8 participants meet selection criteria. (Jan 2017) Contact will be made by the researcher, via NASC administrator for main phase.</p>
<p>11. Are participants likely to feel under pressure to consent / assent to participation?</p>	<p>During the initial stage, the researcher will be working as LA advisor, so there could be a possibility of some feeling expected to participate, but hopefully this will be negated through information/ discussion about purpose. From September 2016, researcher will no longer be a LA employee, and recruitment will be via NASC cohorts, largely involving people who do not know the researcher.</p>
<p>12. How will voluntary informed consent be obtained from individual participants or those with a right to consent for them?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductory letter</li> <li>• Phone call</li> <li>• Email</li> <li>• Other (please specify)</li> </ul>	<p>Please indicate all those that apply and add examples in an appendix.</p> <p><b>YES</b> (sent via email) <b>NO</b> – unless further information requested from participant <b>YES</b> – will include Participant information sheet and initial questionnaire This (voluntary consent) will be reiterated at each stage e.g. before beginning interviews.</p>
<p>13. How will permission be sought from those responsible for institutions / organisations hosting the study?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductory letter</li> <li>• Phone call</li> <li>• Email</li> </ul>	<p>Please indicate all those that apply and add examples in an appendix.</p> <p>YES (via email) NO YES - The SENCo is considered competent to provide their own consent, but information will also be provided to the Head teacher of the school where the SENCo is employed outlining the purpose of the research, the role of the participant and assurance of anonymity. A permission form showing their</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other (please specify)</li> </ul>	<p>understanding, permission for the SENCo to participate and for the interview to be held on the school site will be given. Contact and discussion with NASC Course Leader for permission to contact cohort.</p>
<p>14. How will the privacy and confidentiality of participants be safeguarded? (Please give brief details).</p>	<p>Confidentiality cannot be understood in the sense of not sharing data, as the research design is such that the participant's views are central. However, all data will be anonymised and no person or institution will be identifiable. During focus group discussions, instruction will be given to participants to preserve the anonymity of group members and confidentiality being kept within the group. All participants will review transcripts of their interviews and at the point of analysis to check interpretation of their views to ensure an accurate representation which is suitable for inclusion in the research publication. Location of the interviews will also consider privacy and confidentiality. See also, data protection in section 15. Code of conduct protocols will be adhered to regarding safeguarding.</p>
<p>15. What steps will be taken to comply with the Data Protection Act?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Safe storage of data</li> <li>- Anonymisation of data</li> <li>- Destruction of data after 5 years</li> <li>- Other (please specify)</li> </ul>	<p>Please indicate all those that apply.</p> <p><b>YES</b> – technology and files will be password protected. <b>YES</b> – Data can refer to SENCo A, B etc. No school or LA will be identifiable. <b>YES</b> Audio files will be deleted once transcripts of interviews have been reviewed and agreed by participants.</p>
<p>16. How will participants be made aware of the results of the study?</p>	<p>Feedback at each phase of study through checking correct interpretation/ transcription of information. Participants will be sent a link to access the research document via CREATE.</p>
<p>17. What steps will be taken to allow participants to retain control over audio-visual records of them and over their creative products and items of a personal nature?</p>	<p>There will be no visual records. Audio recordings will be made, and participants asked to verify the accuracy of the transcription. They have the right to withdraw or ask for amendments to be made.</p>
<p>18. Give the qualifications and/or experience of the researcher and/or supervisor in this form of research. (Brief answer only)</p>	<p>Masters and taught EdD modules included action research, use of interviews and focus groups. Professional experience as LA advisor, senior leader in school and educational consultant regarding professional dialogues, confidentiality etc.</p>

Attach any: Participant information sheets and letters  
Consent forms  
Data collection instruments  
Peer review comments



## DECLARATION

- I certify that the information in this form is accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief and I take full responsibility for it.
- I certify that a risk assessment for this study has been carried out in compliance with the University's Health and Safety policy.
- I certify that any required CRB/VBS check has been carried out.
- I undertake to carry out this project under the terms specified in the Canterbury Christ Church University Research Governance Handbook.
- I undertake to inform the relevant Faculty Research Ethics Committee of any significant change in the question, design or conduct of the study over the course of the study. I understand that such changes may require a new application for ethics approval.
- I undertake to inform the Research Governance Manager in the Graduate School and Research Office when the proposed study has been completed.
- I am aware of my responsibility to comply with the requirements of the law and appropriate University guidelines relating to the security and confidentiality of participant or other personal data.
- I understand that project records/data may be subject to inspection for audit purposes if required in future and that project records should be kept securely for five years or other specified period.
- I understand that the personal data about me contained in this application will be held by the Research Office and that this will be managed according to the principles established in the Data Protection Act.

**Researcher's Name: Elizabeth Harby**

**Date: 13<sup>th</sup> January 2017**

## Appendix 9

### Code of conduct to be followed during research by Liz Harby:

The research has been designed with reference to BERA Guidelines (2011) and Canterbury Christ Church University Ethical Committee Criteria.

Prospective participants will be provided with a Participant Information sheet outlining the purpose and procedures of the research.

Those wishing to participate in the research are asked to complete an initial questionnaire and provide their contact details should they wish to be contacted for interview.

Participants meeting the recruitment criteria will be invited for interview once they have completed a consent form. Participants, as practising professionals are deemed competent to make their own voluntary consent.

Participation is entirely voluntary and participants may withdraw at any point without having to provide a reason.

Participants will be asked to review transcriptions of their interviews and alert the researcher to any inaccurate information or if they wish for information to be altered or removed.

All information provided will be held anonymously for 5 years. It will be held securely and only accessible by the researcher.

Audio recordings will be deleted following review of transcriptions by participants.

If prior to beginning the interview, the participant consider that they are not fit to proceed, they should inform the researcher and the interview can be re-arranged.

During the interview, if the participant feels stressed, anxious, or emotional they should request a break, during which the participant and researcher will discuss whether it is appropriate to continue or suspend the interview. Depending on the nature and severity of need, the researcher and participant may discuss the issue, the researcher may signpost the participant to further support or the researcher may need to inform the head teacher.

Should the participant make a disclosure during the interview, the interview will be suspended while appropriate procedures are followed.

If during the research process the researcher feels under undue pressure or requires supervision or advice regarding an event, they will seek advice from their academic supervisors.