

## Who Looks After Our Wellbeing? A National Survey Exploring the Wellbeing of SENCOs (Special Education Needs Co-ordinators) in Irish Primary Schools

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### Abstract

*This paper will provide an overview of the key findings emerging from Phase One of this study's data collection, involving a national survey investigating the wellbeing of Special Education Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) in Irish primary schools.*

*In the past number of years, the Irish special education system has radically transformed, bringing about policy proliferation and a relentless pace of change. Engaging with timely professional learning and development for school leaders, teachers, and SENCOs to support enactment of change has been challenging. The introduction of a revised SET Allocation model, the lack of formal recognition of the SENCO role in policy, well as the increase in the prevalence of special education in pupils, are all potential stressors negatively affecting the wellbeing of SENCOs. Despite the developments in wellbeing policy and practice in Irish schools, there appears to be a focus on the wellbeing of students, with a neglect for the wellbeing of teachers and school leaders. This research investigated school-based factors impacting the wellbeing of SENCOs in order to contribute a better understanding to both policy and practice.*

*This research study utilises an interpretivist, mixed-methods approach involving a two sequential phases of data collection, with the first phase informing the design of the second phase. This paper will focus on Phase One of the data collection process which involved a quantitative online national survey with over 320 SENCOs. The online survey included a wellbeing scale, as well as closed and open-ended questions exploring the wellbeing of the participants. The survey was analysed using quantitative and qualitative methods. This paper will comprehensively discuss and explore the findings from Phase One of data collection.*

**Keywords:** wellbeing, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), Special Educational Teachers (SETs), national survey

### 1. Introduction

Inclusive and special education has transformed internationally over the past three decades [1]. The promotion of inclusive practices internationally has increased the awareness and identification of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) within school settings [2], thereby emphasising the importance of the role of the SENCO. Internationally, many countries utilise the role of SENCO as a pivotal part of their inclusive practices for students with SEN [3]. Despite the formal recognition and identification of the SENCO role in many countries, there is a lack of consistency between countries in defining this role [4]. In Ireland, there is no formal recognition for the SENCO role within the Irish policy context, thus little guidance is available on how the role should be fulfilled [5]. The lack of specifications for the SENCO role creates unclear role expectations [2]. This research aims to further explore how the role of SENCOs in Irish primary schools is impacting upon the wellbeing of those undertaking this role.

Teacher wellbeing is an essential component of school wellbeing and success [6], especially with the increasing challenges and stressors faced by schools in recent years [7], and updated policies and guidelines from the Department of Education. In relation to national wellbeing policies within education in Ireland, there appears to be a focus on the wellbeing of students, with a neglect for the wellbeing of teachers and school leaders. This research aspires to address this gap in national policy, addressing the wellbeing of school leaders in special education.

### 2. The Role of the SENCO



The Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) is usually the designated teacher in schools who oversees the provision for inclusion of students with SEN or additional needs [5]. They ensure that students with SEN receive appropriate supports in school, so that these students can successfully access the curriculum and engage in school activities [8]. Extensive international research suggests that the role of the SENCO is complex and contextually based [9; 10] and continually evolving [4; 7]. Significant changes to the role of the SENCO continue to occur as it develops in response to inclusive and special education policies [2;4]. SENCOs play a key role in implementing SEN and inclusive policies [11]; many of these policies are interpreted differently in schools [12]. Therefore, the SENCO role is very subjective; dependent upon the school's interpretation and implementation of the SENCO's role [13]. This lack of clarity about the role expectations has created challenges for SENCOs [2]. This creates inconsistency in the duties and responsibilities of the SENCO between Irish schools [5].

Much of the literature would also promote the formal leadership status of SENCOs [2;5], while other research insists that not all SENCOs want a formal leadership role [11; 2]. Empirical research has revealed that SENCOs who do not have a formal leadership role are limited in their ability to undertake the role of co-ordinating and organising whole-school inclusive practices [14]. It is suggested that providing SENCOs with a school leadership status, enhances their voice when engaging in whole-school inclusive planning and changes [8]. Without this formal title, some SENCOs begin to perceive the role as "low status and operational rather than as a senior, strategic management role" ([15] p.299). Nonetheless, in Fitzgerald and Radford's study [2], despite SENCOs suggesting that the formal leadership status supported them in their role, the formal role created barriers with their colleagues, diminishing the opportunities for collaboration and group organisation for inclusive provision. The formal leadership position of some SENCOs eliminated the distribution of responsibility to other SEN colleagues, increasing their workload and responsibilities [2].

Often SENCOs are viewed as experts in their field and are therefore expected to be an 'agent of change' [15; 16]. Some SENCOs consider their role of influencing change within inclusive practices and provision sufficient without being a member of the school leadership team [8]. If SENCOs are part of the school leadership team, it involves balancing both managerial and leadership responsibilities related to inclusion [17], adding pressures to their role. SENCOs need to be able to act as agents of change in terms of inclusive provision and practice in schools [18]. However, this is not possible where SENCOs have little agency to instigate changes to inclusion at a whole school level [17]. Furthermore, the views of other teachers and colleagues towards the role of the SENCO shapes the role itself, influencing their potential opportunity for leadership [13]. Many SENCOs feel frustrated when they are not perceived by their colleagues as strategic leaders; thus, they lack the authority to influence whole-school change [19]. Furthermore, the administrative workload has hindered SENCOs availability to support children, families and other teachers in their school and ability to influence practice [20].

The discrepancies in the empirical literature emphasises that this area requires further empirical research to fully recognise and comprehend SENCO's perspectives on and experiences of leadership in school settings [21].

### **3. Wellbeing of SENCOs**

Defining the wellbeing of Special Education Teachers (SETs) and Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) lacks research and is often defined by the concept of teacher wellbeing. However, the role of mainstream class teacher and SET or SENCO differs significantly, it is possible that SETs experience more stress than mainstream teachers [22]. Doyle Bradley [22] was the first Irish study to investigate the stressors impacting upon the wellbeing of SETs in Irish schools. The study involved SETs from different school settings including special schools, primary schools and post-primary schools. The findings from this study provide an insight into stressors impacting SETs, with many reporting 'workload' and 'time' as the most significant stressors.

As previously discussed, the role of the SENCO lacks clarity in terms of the role expectations, within the Irish education context [2;5]. Therefore, challenges are created for SENCOs through inconsistencies in their duties and responsibilities [5], in addition to increasing accountability and administrative workload due to changing inclusive policies [23]. The formalisation of the SENCO role would not only clarify the role and responsibilities, but also allocate specific time to the role, increase



opportunities for collaboration with the SEN team [24], and increase the effectiveness of the SENCO role [9]. In addition, assigning adequate time to the SENCO role within policy, may help to elevate some of the work-related stressors as reported by many SETs in Doyle Bradley's [22] study. This study didn't address SENCOs as a group, specifically, therefore this research study further investigated stressors for SENCOs within the school context.

Many factors supporting the wellbeing of SETs and SENCOs within the school setting have been reported in the literature. Colum and Mac Ruairc [25] suggested that the development of communities of practice would provide a support network for SENCOs and reduce their sense of isolation and loneliness. O'Hara [26] conducted a small-scale mixed methods study with post-primary SENCOs exploring the impact of these communities of practice on the SENCOs. The findings revealed these groups helped the SENCOs feel less anxious and have a greater sense of belonging and identity [26]; thereby positively supporting their wellbeing. Furthermore, the development of collaborative practices, within the school, provide SENCOs with a sense of belonging and support in their role [25; 26]. This was further supported by the findings of O'Gorman and Drudy [27] who highlighted the importance of SENCOs collaborating with other staff members, parents and other professionals, to avoid SENCOs 'developing individual expertise rather than the need for distributed expertise...among the whole-school community' (p.165).

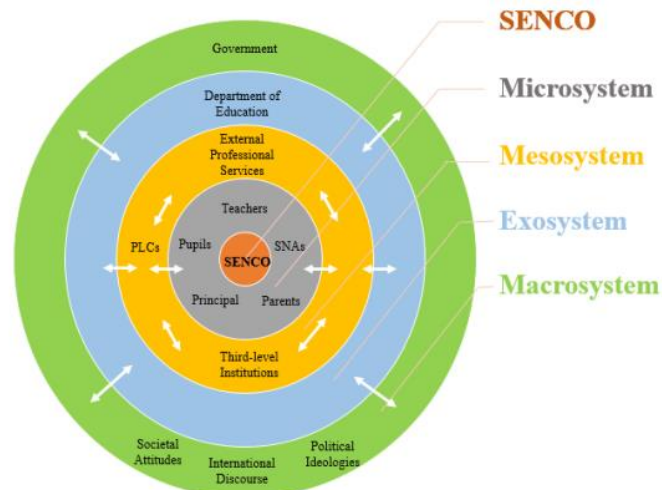
Limited research has explored the wellbeing of SENCOs and factors impacting their wellbeing. This paper provides insight into factors that positively and/or negatively impact upon the wellbeing of SENCOs.

#### **4. Theoretical Framework**

The research study adopted Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) and Jordan's Relational-Cultural theory (2017) as the overarching theoretical frameworks. These frameworks theorise the impact of relationships and context on the wellbeing of SENCOs, as well as to comprehensively explore the wellbeing of SENCOs and the factors that impact upon their wellbeing.

##### **4.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory**

The Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory [28] was employed as a framework for this study, as it provides a systems-based view of wellbeing, identifying the significance of the individual as well as the interactions that occur in the broader society. Bronfenbrenner developed classifications of various levels or systems impacting upon a person's development, referring to these systems as a 'series of layers with each layer located inside the other' ([28] p.22). In the case of this study, the SENCO is at the centre, surrounded by multiple systems that interact with one and other, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Figure 1). The model provides a view of how SENCOs experience their environment, especially the interactions in the school environment, and the impact their surroundings and interactions have on their development and wellbeing. This theory provides a deeper analysis of how the interconnected systems, from the school microsystem, to the macrosystem including national policies [29] could impact the wellbeing of SENCOs.



**Fig. 1.** Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory adapted from Bronfenbrenner [28] and applied to the SENCO role (as cited by [30], p.137)

#### 4.2 Jordan's Relational-Cultural Theory

In this research study, Bronfenbrenner's [28] framework is complemented by the theoretical framework of Jordan's Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) [31] to further explore the contextual impact of these various relationships on SENCOs. The RCT [31] offers another lens to explore the contextual nuance of these relationships within the different systems of the SENCO's ecological system. This framework suggests that when individuals engage in positive relationships, it supports a better understanding of themselves, others and interpersonal relationships [31]. The RCT framework also acknowledges that disconnections can occur in relationships, which can negatively affect the person in various ways including; a drop in energy, a decreased sense of self and withdrawal from relationships [31]. Therefore, in this research study, this framework focuses on understanding the impact of connections and disconnections in relationships between the SENCO and other individuals at the different system levels and how these relationships affect the wellbeing of SENCOs.

### 5. Materials and Methods

#### 5.1 Design

Phase One of this research study involved an online, national survey for SENCOs in Irish primary schools. The survey consisted of five sections. Section One examined the participant's profile within their school context through series multiple-choice questions. Section Two focused on eliciting information about the school profile; type of school, age of school, enrolment numbers, which was presented in a series of multiple-choice questions. Section Three examined wellbeing within the school context through a series of multiple-choice questions. Section Four focused on staff wellbeing through the inclusion of two Likert scales. The first scale examined the role of staff wellbeing within the school context, acknowledging the presence or absence of support strategies for staff wellbeing. The second Likert scale was the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF) scale [32], which included fourteen questions relating to the respondent's mental health and wellbeing within the last month. Section Five consisted of three open-ended questions relating to factors that positively support the participant's wellbeing, factors that negatively impact upon the participant's wellbeing and a question allowing the participants to contribute any other relevant information.

#### 5.2 Participants

The national survey was directed at SENCOs including Principals, Deputy Principals and SETs, in primary schools throughout Ireland. A total of 320 participants completed the online survey. This sample was just slightly below the target sample size of 342 SENCOs. This sample represented SENCOs from various school contexts; including different school type, school category, DEIS status and geographical location. The breakdown of the participants was 55 (17.2%) male and 265 (82.8%)





female (N=320). Participants' length of teaching experience varied from 4.1% having 1-10 years (N=13), 30.6% having 11-20 years (N=98) and 65.3% having more than 20 years of teaching experience (N=209).

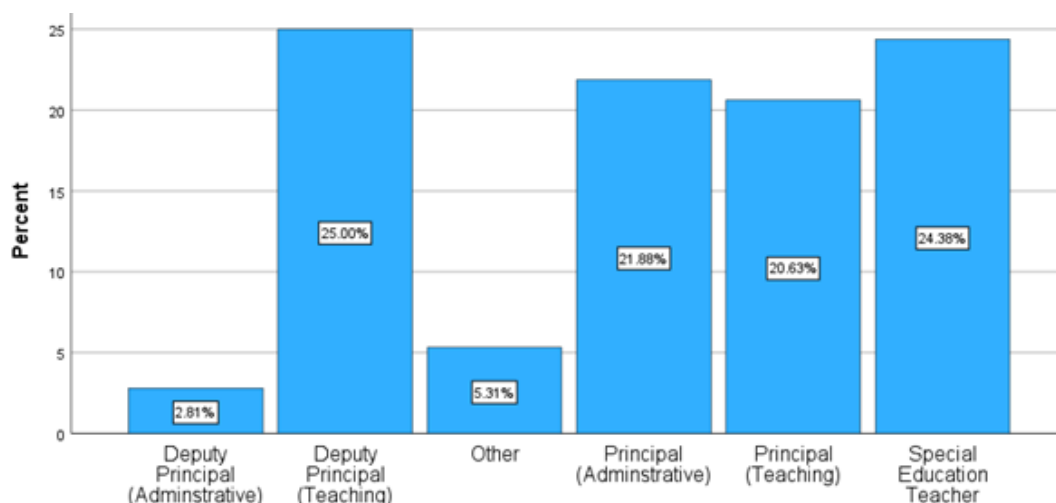
### 5.3 Data Analysis

The data gathered from the national survey included mostly quantitative, with some qualitative data. The analysis of the quantitative data from the survey was completed using SPSS software and the qualitative data was analysed using Microsoft Excel. Following the sorting and preparing of the quantitative survey data, the researcher utilised SPSS to obtain descriptive and inferential statistics from the online survey dataset. A range of descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages and bar and pie charts, which emerged from the data were utilised to describe the response of the participants. SPSS was also used for inferential statistical analysis utilising the data gathered from the pre-established Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF; [32]) scale.

All the qualitative data collected from the three open-ended questions were analysed using Microsoft Excel. These questions related to factors negatively and positively impacting upon the wellbeing of SENCOs. All of the respondents had been previously given an I.D. number in SPSS, ensuring the quantitative data could be linked to their qualitative responses. Having organised all the data correctly, the responses to the open-ended questions were examined and analysed utilising the Braun and Clarke [33] Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) framework. The RTA process involves six steps for data engagement, coding and theme development.

## 6. Phase One Findings

As part of the survey, SENCOs were asked to indicate their professional role within their current school setting including Principal; teaching or administrative, Deputy Principal; teaching or administrative, or Special Education Teacher. The percentage responses in each category are provide in Figure 2. These findings indicate that nearly half of SENCOs were in the role of Deputy Principal (teaching) (25%) or Special Education Teacher (24.3%). Furthermore, another 40% of respondents were in the role of Principal; either administrative principal 21.88% or teaching principal 20.63%, as well as their SENCO role. It is noteworthy that no respondent reported being a full-time SENCO.

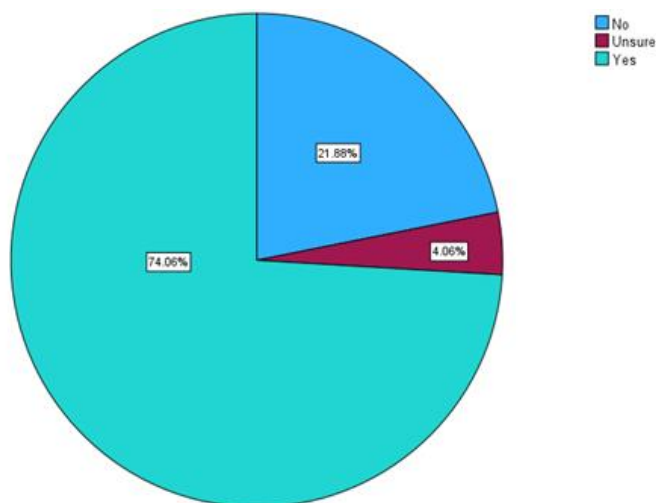


**Fig. 2. Description of professional role held by leaders for inclusion in their current school.** Note SENCOs who selected 'Other' included: 'Acting Principal', 'class teacher with AP2 post' and 'special class teacher'.

Next, SENCOs were asked if they held a post of responsibility (leadership status) to coordinate special education provision in their schools. The majority of SENCOs did not hold a post of responsibility for their SEN role (65.94%). Those who reported having a post of responsibility; 23.13% held the more senior AP1 post of responsibility, with 10.94% having an AP2 post of responsibility.



Finally, SENCOs were also asked if their school had an established SEN team, and the findings are displayed in Figure 3. This Figure reports that the majority of SENCOs had an established SEN team in their schools to support them in their role.



**Fig. 3.** Findings related to the establishment of SEN Team in SENCO's school

The three open-ended questions that comprised Section Five of the survey were analysed using RTA analysis. This analysis revealed five main factors that negatively impacted upon the wellbeing of SENCOs; unclear roles and responsibilities, lack of time for overwhelming workload, challenging school environment, insufficient external supports, and insufficient guidance on policy and practice. The “*lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities*” (P130) and “*the SENCO not being recognised as a role by the DES*” (P204) flooded the findings, with many SENCOs having a huge sense of frustration and stress, with no clear limit on their time and skills, expertise and knowledge, within the school setting, as elucidated in the quote below from P145:

*The amount of work to be done on a daily basis. Promises being made at SENCO Forums that our role will be recognised (formally). Research after research carried out on SENCO role but seems to be of little value to the Dept. How many more years is needed? At this stage I ask myself why would anybody want to be a SENCO?*

SENCOs also reported overwhelming workloads without enough time allocated for their duties, resulting in many SENCOs feeling stressed and burned out, as evident from P10

*The amount of paperwork/policy work/red tape associated with the role of SENCO. All of these take up so much of my time, time which is needed for planning/teaching in SET/pupil contact. This has a significant negative impact on my work/life balance and my sleep pattern. It also has significantly increased my stress levels.*

The thematic analysis also revealed five main factors that positively impacted upon the wellbeing of SENCOs; relationships, collaboration, support, school culture and wellbeing practices. At the microsystem level, many SENCOs reported the significant impact of positive relationships on their wellbeing. The relationships reported by SENCOs including with colleagues, pupils, parents, Board of Management and wider school community. From Jordan's RCT [31] framework, these findings highlight how affirmative interactions within the school context can positively impact respondents' wellbeing and their work experience and satisfaction. Many SENCOs highlighted the importance of developing “*great rapport between staff members*” (P52), as well as building “*friendships within the staff, having the trust of others and being able to trust*” (P23) and having “*laughs with staff*” (P20).

According to the respondents, collaborations with colleagues to share ideas, resources, workload and problems, made them feel more supported in their role as SENCO. This is evident in the quotes below from P261 and P93:



*Collaboration with other staff members makes a big difference to me and helps me to feel supported and supportive of others*

*A feeling of collaboration among staff members & feeling like colleagues will help each other out when needed*

Many SENCOs felt that collaborating with “a SET team where the workload can be shared” (P247) reduced their stress and sense of isolation in their role. SENCOs had a sense of collaboration when “SET Team pools ideas” (P42) and they work with “a great professional team of SETs and class teachers” (P207).

## 7. Conclusion

It is evident from the findings of Phase One that SENCOs in Irish primary schools are overwhelmed and stressed with the workload involved in their role, as well as the lack of clear policy and guidelines regarding their SENCOs role and responsibilities. Many SENCOs reported that without the support and collaboration of colleagues and established school SEN Teams, they would not be able to fulfill their role. Nonetheless, the extensive workload and time restraints are intensifying the stress and burnout for many SENCOs. These findings align with the previous research, further highlighting the lack of clarity surrounding the role of SENCOs in Irish schools [2;5]. Furthermore, the importance of collaborative practices to support the SENCO in their role and sense of belonging was emphasised in this study, supporting the findings from O'Hara [26] and Colum and MacRuaric [25]. Nonetheless, Phase Two of the data collection process was essential to further explore the survey data, as well as exploring topics in-depth by uncovering the reason for people's views and perspectives. The main topics which were further discussed and explored in the interviews included SENCOs' teaching journey, their understanding of wellbeing, factors negatively/positively impacting their wellbeing within the school context, and the role of the Department of Education. The interviews in this study provided an in-depth understanding of the interviewees' experiences and views of wellbeing within their school context.

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