Supporting Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in Early Years Settings: Findings from Research

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Section 1: Executive Summary

The inclusion of all children into early years settings has been elevated in importance in recent years both in policy formulations and in actual setting practices. However, there remains a degree of ambiguity regarding how to successfully implement the inclusion agenda and how to effectively support those that play a crucial role in implementing this agenda. This is particularly the case with regards to including children with individual, distinct and complex needs and impairments into early years settings. As a result, the Pre-school Learning Alliance has conducted research on the roles and responsibilities of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in early years settings. This report then provides an opportunity to disseminate our findings on how early years settings include children with special educational needs. It also hopes to suggest what extra methods of support must be implemented to effectively assist early years practitioners to ensure that all children with SEN/impairments are included in pre-school settings.

The Alliance is a leader in the field of equal opportunities and a driving force in promoting the inclusion of all children into pre-school settings and the wider society. The Pre-school Learning Alliance is committed to the effective intervention and inclusion of young children with special educational needs (SEN) and/or impairments into early years settings.

The experience and expertise of the early years workforce are valuable resources to draw on when considering how pre-schools care for and educate children with additional needs and how society values and perceives them both as children and as children with individual needs.

Early years practitioners face a challenging task in identifying very young children with additional needs and simultaneously providing support and advice to concerned parents, which requires a high level of expertise. Since the introduction of new legislation, the charity has been monitoring the introduction and development of SENCOs in early years settings.

This project then represents the charity's objective of including children with SEN/impairments into early years settings. The project hoped to discover areas where support and advice were most needed in order to support pre-school practitioners in implementing the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice of 2001.
Recent research by Clough and Nutbrown (2004) discovered that five key themes play an important role in determining the effective inclusion of children with SEN/impairments into pre-schools as well as in promoting more general inclusive practice in pre-school settings. These include: the educators’ personal experiences, professional development, views of childhood, inclusion and exclusion, and the role of parents. Clough and Nutbrown also suggest that the multitude of early years policy developments in the UK in recent years have had an impact on the effective inclusion of children with SEN/impairments into pre-school settings. The frequently complex factors that interplay when considering issues of inclusion generally and issues of including children with special educational needs/impairments in particular suggest that this piece of research is timely. Effectively supporting SENCOs in pre-school settings often translates into effectively supporting children with SEN/impairments and promoting more general inclusive practice in pre-school settings.

Findings from initial interviews undertaken in phase one of the research flagged up a number of issues within pre-schools which were a cause of concern for practitioners and where they required additional support. These are as follows:

1. SENCO duties
The nominated SENCO often holds multiple roles within the pre-school, which frequently results in a vastly increased workload in some settings. The data analysis suggests that while the vast majority of SENCOs are experienced (both in terms of training and in terms of direct experience) and have a clear understanding of the responsibilities involved with the SENCO position, some SENCOs are inexperienced and lack a general understanding of the responsibilities involved. This is perhaps connected to the lack of clear and coherent job descriptions for the post, which in turn contribute to difficulties when developing Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) and limit the SENCOs ability to develop attainable targets.

2. Liaising outside the setting
The data analysis suggests that pre-school SENCOs are concerned about the lack of information sharing between pre-school and primary school settings. Children with special educational needs and/or impairments are typically effectively identified during the pre-school years and a child-specific intervention programme is generated and implemented. However, SENCOs state that primary school special educational needs workers as well as other key workers (e.g., health care professionals) do not...
effectively tap into the experience and expertise of pre-school SENCOs, particularly information regarding the particular conditions of individual children moving from pre-school settings to primary school.

3. Training
SENCOs in rural areas state that the courses they wish to attend are often over-subscribed or are not relevant to the needs of the group. This suggests that the training offered by local authorities, local colleges and sector organisations needs to be re-evaluated in light of the needs of SENCOs. Additionally, SENCOs have difficulty accessing relevant training as a result of shortages of staff in pre-school settings. This is of particular concern with regards to developing a trained childcare workforce which is qualified to the levels suggested in Government recommendations.

During the course of investigating the roles and duties of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) for the second phase of the study, this research identifies a number of issues that warrant further investigation if SENCOs are to be effectively supported in their role of including children with SEN and impairments into pre-school settings. Results from a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) targeting identified SENCOs suggests that, although settings were active in appointing a SENCO, there remains a degree of ambiguity regarding their particular role in the pre-school. It also highlights a number of issues regarding the type and level of support necessary both internally and externally if SENCOs are to effectively perform their role of early identification of and intervention for children with special educational needs and/or impairments.

The key findings that emerged from the research are as follows:

- Two thirds of SENCOs do not have a job description that clearly defines their role and thus rely on the SEN Code of Practice to inform their job.
- The vast majority of SENCOs state that they are effectively supported by their pre-school management committees. However, only 16% of pre-school management committees have received any training to support the SENCO in their role.
- Almost three quarters of SENCOs have another role in the pre-school in addition to being a SENCO, with over half also being the pre-school leader.
• Less than 10% of SENCOs have designated hours for their SENCO duties, with the majority performing these duties in their own time and/or alongside their other responsibilities.

• The majority of SENCOs have knowledge gained through training and/or experience of working with children with SEN and impairments prior to taking up their role as SENCO.

Based on the findings of this research, we propose the following seven recommendations:

1. **The development of a comprehensive and accessible job description for SENCOs:**

   The lack of a comprehensive and clear job description that is applicable to all SENCOs and across all settings creates a degree of ambiguity as to what the roles and responsibilities of the SENCO position are. As a result, we recommend that Government and other key agencies (the Alliance included) work together to develop a comprehensive and clear job description for this position to lessen confusion regarding the role and its responsibilities.

2. **The need for SEN placements during training:**

   While many SENCOs have direct and often personal experience of supporting individuals with SEN/impairments before taking the position of the SENCO, they state that the training provided would be of greater benefit if it were to include a work experience component, for example, one that includes shadowing an experienced SENCO in a pre-school setting. This would be of value for a number of reasons. First and foremost it would provide the SENCO with a mentor that would guide them through the initial stages of moving from training to pre-school practitioner. It would also lessen any feelings of apprehension when making the transition from training to practitioner.

3. **The need for applicable and accessible training and retraining programmes:**

   Making training programmes relevant and accessible for all SENCOs, staff, management and volunteers irrespective of location. For example, SENCOs in rural areas state that many of the courses that they would like to access are oversubscribed and not relevant for their needs. In addition to this it is recommended that the SENCO role is conceptualised as one of continuous training, that is, providing SENCOs with continuous information via newsletters or
4. **The need for core funding for training and retraining SENCOs:**
In order for SENCOs to be able to access training/retraining it is essential that they can draw on funding. Many pre-schools struggle to finance training, having to pay not only for the cost of the courses but also for relief cover for the SENCO. Training is a valuable method of support that effectively assists SENCOs, thus we recommend the need for core funding so that settings which are already struggling financially do not miss out on training opportunities as a result of not being able to meet the costs.

5. **The need for SENCOs to be just SENCOs:**
Given that SENCOs, like numerous other pre-school practitioners, perform a number of roles within the early years settings, e.g., designated SENCO and pre-school leader, the lack of sufficient numbers of workers presently in the childcare sector means that many practitioners are unable to cope with the more particular roles and responsibilities that they may also have, as is the case with SENCOs. This impacts also on the ability of current SENCOs to perform their duties effectively (over heavy workloads due to multiplicity of roles) and to engage in training to bring themselves up to date with the latest developments (due to lack of staff to cover).

6. **Acknowledgement of the pre-school SENCO role by other agencies/professionals**
There should be greater recognition of the role that pre-school SENCOs perform and their role in the effective identification of and intervention for children with SEN/impairments. This is crucial if continuity of care when children with SEN/impairments move from pre-school settings to compulsory-aged school settings is to be guaranteed. Some key professionals (primary school SEN workers, health care professionals) do not seek the experience and expertise of the pre-school SENCO nor engage with them effectively. As a result there is a lack of continuity of support for children with complex and individual needs and hinders the effective operation of the integrated services approach espoused by Government.
7. Development of a network for SENCOs

It is of importance for practitioners to be able to be part of an informal network whereby they can share their experiences and access support from fellow SENCOs whose experiences and knowledge can inform their role. As such, a network of support would not only enable SENCOs to feel connected to a larger community but could also be a forum for highlighting good practice which can then be implemented within their own settings. Organisations like the Pre-school Learning Alliance are crucial in developing such networks in helping practitioners set up more local or particular networks and in facilitating the sharing of information, experience, knowledge and good practice. It is important to acknowledge that the development of these networks is additional to the help and expertise offered by Area SENCOs.
Section 2: Background to the Project

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is a registered educational charity that links 15,000 pre-schools and 500,000 children between 0-5 and their families in England. One of its objectives is ‘to enhance the development and education of children.’\(^1\)

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is committed to the effective intervention and inclusion of young children with special educational needs (SEN) and/or impairments into early years settings. The Alliance is a leader in the field of equal opportunities and a driving force in promoting the inclusion of all children. The charity is committed to offering ‘...continuing support, encouragement and help to such groups and, in particular, to ensure that such groups offer opportunities for all children regardless of race, culture, religion or means.’\(^2\)

As part of the charity’s inclusion action programme for early years settings the Alliance is researching the roles of pre-school practitioners and the provision of inclusive practice. It focuses in particular on the support and advice necessary for the SEN Action Programme to be effectively implemented in pre-school settings. In light of the objectives of the charity and the current Government’s drive on inclusion-related issues, the Alliance has undertaken research examining the roles and responsibilities of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOS) in early years settings, as well as the support necessary for SENCOS to effectively perform their role, a role that is commonly acknowledged as one of the most demanding and difficult roles in pre-school settings.

\(^2\) Ibid.
Section 3: Introduction

Early years service provision for young children with special educational needs (SEN) and/or impairments has rapidly changed over the last few years. In 1997 the green paper ‘Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs’ and the subsequent ‘Programme of Action’ (1998) detailed improvements for enhancing the statutory framework and procedures for SEN. In 2001 new legislation was introduced to detail these changes, namely the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) and the production of the new Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (SENCOP, 2001).

The 2002 report ‘Special Educational Needs: a mainstream issue’ by the Audit Commission highlighted specific difficulties in identifying and finding appropriate childcare for children with SEN/impairments. The report stated that the knowledge and experiences of practitioners working in the early years sector are crucial for early identification and intervention. This report then acknowledged the crucial role that SENCOs play in determining a child’s particular needs, offering that child support, supporting parents in understanding, coming to terms with and supporting their child’s particular need/impairment as well as implementing the more general inclusion agenda in early years settings.

In the recent special educational strategy ‘Removing Barriers to Achievement’ (2004), the Government set out their 10-year vision for the education of children with SEN/impairments, stating:

“Early intervention is the cornerstone of our strategy. ‘Every Child Matters’ recognised the lasting benefit of early intervention - providing a sound foundation for future learning and development …”

(2004; p12)

Effective early years care and education provides an excellent opportunity for identifying children with SEN/impairments and thus enables early intervention. In order to ensure that service provision is inclusive and of the highest quality settings need to work closely with parents and external organisations to establish common goals. Legislation provides a foundation for changing the way society views and responds to children with additional needs. Early years care and education providers are now implementing these legislative changes into their service provision.
Early years settings in receipt of education funding are required to follow the procedures outlined in the 2001 SEN Code of Practice. Settings are required to appoint a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) to support early identification of and intervention for children with SEN/impairments. Responsibility for inclusion is a matter for all members of staff, however the SENCO coordinates the day-to-day operation of the SEN policy and provision. Senior management are responsible for ensuring that effective inclusive practice is carried out and that policy and procedures reflect relevant legislative duties.

The current research project was developed to meet the charity’s objective of including children with special educational needs and/or impairments and to examine how pre-schools are managing their service provision. The project aimed to look at Special Educational Needs Coordinators’ (SENCOs) perceptions of their roles and responsibilities and explore what further support and advice is required to aid pre-school practitioners implement the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice.
Section 4: Approach and Method

Policy and procedure regarding including children with special educational needs (SEN) and/or impairments in early years settings has been systematically reviewed in light of new legislation and changing public attitudes. Early years settings in receipt of educational funding are required to appoint a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) to ensure that the educational needs of children with SEN/impairments are met. The role and responsibilities of SENCOs are defined in the 2001 SEN Code of Practice, however duties and workloads vary according to the number of children with SEN/impairments in the setting and the availability of resources and practical support to assist the role.

This research hoped to discover how SENCOs in early years settings are incorporating these changes and to identify any issues relating to the role that may prevent the effective inclusion of children with SEN/impairments.

The research was conducted in two parts:
1. An independent researcher interviewed SENCOs in eight rural and urban pre-school settings. The purpose of the interviews was to identify any issues relating to the effectiveness of the SENCO role. Information collected from these interviews structured the national questionnaire.
2. A questionnaire was sent to member pre-schools that had previously identified themselves as having a named SENCO.

This report provides our organisation and others with vital information on the SENCO role and the support necessary for SENCOs to effectively include children with SEN/impairments into early years settings.

4.1 Identifying the Effectiveness of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO)
Initial interviews were undertaken to document the strengths and weaknesses in the developing role of the SENCO. Visits were made to eight pre-school settings, four in an inner city area (Southwark) and four in a rural area (Norfolk.) Interviews took place with the nominated SENCO (most SENCOs were also the manager of the group). The data highlights three areas that the pre-school settings noted as being of
concern and in which they require additional support: the duties of the SENCO; liaising with parents and schools; and training.

4.2 Information Gathering
The questionnaire was designed to gather information on issues of inclusion in pre-school settings, namely legal obligations, perceptions of the SENCO role as well as the training and support provided both inside and outside the setting.

4.3 Method
Questionnaires were sent to 3,303 pre-school settings that had previously been identified as having a SENCO in the Pre-school Learning Alliance’s 2002 annual Group Membership Questionnaire. 1,364 replies were received, representing a return response rate of 41%.

4.4 Research Aims
Although the role of SENCO is broadly defined in the SEN Code of Practice (2001), the duties and workload of SENCOs varies between pre-school settings. This study aimed to examine SENCOs’ perceptions of their roles and responsibilities in their pre-school as well as the SEN Code of Practice. It hoped to identify the level of support provided by other workers and agencies to the SENCO and to recommend (based on these research findings) new methods/practices for supporting SENCOs in their demanding and difficult role.

4.5 Analysis of the data
The data was analysed quantitatively using a statistical software package. Qualitative data collected during the interviews provided examples that illustrated the issues of concern for SENCOs. The quotes are presented anonymously in order to protect the confidentiality of the pre-school SENCOs.

This report presents the findings and analysis from the data collected from the research activity.
Section 5: Evaluation and Findings

The evaluation and findings detailed here are from the second phase of the research activity. The findings are presented in five sections: the role of the SENCO; support from inside and outside the pre-school; training and experience; legislation and policy; and additional findings.

5.1 Role of the SENCO

SENCOs were asked about how they perceive the SENCO role with reference to the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (SENCOP). Responses can be seen in figure 1 below:

![Figure 1: Role of the SENCO in relation to the SEN Code of Practice](image)

The majority of SENCOs consider their main duties as follows: implementing the recommendations of the SENCOP; working in partnership; developing resources; engaging in training; and preparing, implementing and reviewing the SEN policy. About half of the SENCOs who responded assume that handling complaints and
assuming legal responsibility are SENCO responsibilities as defined in the SEN Code of Practice. Interestingly, a third of SENCOs consider their role to involve the SEN tribunal. Although SENCOs are obliged to disseminate information about how and when parents can access the SEN tribunal, the SEN Code of Practice notes that it is in fact the responsibility of the Local Education Authority to provide disagreement resolution services.

An interesting and relevant finding suggests that nearly two thirds of SENCOs do not have a job description that clearly defined their role (65.5%), illustrated in figure 2 below:

![Figure 2: As the SENCO do you have a clear job description?](image)

The responses given by those SENCOs who answered that they do have a clear job description indicates that there is a need to develop a comprehensive description applicable to all settings. Analysis of the data indicates that only a few of the job descriptions are deemed comprehensive enough to provide sufficient clarity for the SENCO to perform their duties. The job descriptions sent along with their completed questionnaires by SENCOs often incorporated elements of a good job description, however they are evaluated as incomplete in themselves.

This striking finding highlights the need for a coherent job description available and applicable to all SENCOs that clarifies their role. It is important for childcare workers to have greater clarity regarding the roles they play in pre-school settings based on their job position and responsibilities. It would be beneficial for such a job description to take into account the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) as well as the SEN Code of Practice. In terms of day-to-day provision, it is the setting that is ultimately
responsible for providing access to all. However it appears necessary for the SENCO to work closely with those responsible for implementing the DDA.

The majority of SENCOs believe that their role requires a number of key skills and abilities in order to perform it effectively, these can be seen in figure 3 below.

![Figure 3: Skills and abilities of SENCO](image)

1. Effective writing and communication skills
2. Ability to interpret & have regard for legislation relating to children with SEN/disabilities
3. Ability to monitor and implement policy relating to children with SEN/disabilities
4. Effective interpretation of information based on observations in order to assess children’s progress
5. Ability to use information on children’s needs to inform future planning
6. Ability to match pre-school provision with the needs of children with a range of different abilities
7. Effective identification of barriers to children’s learning
8. Ability to devise an IEP format to suit the pre-school
9. Identifying staff training needs and responding accordingly
10. Facilitating skills in order to support practitioners with inclusive practice
11. Ability to develop and foster positive and co-operative relationships with parents
12. Co-ordinating skills in order to work in partnership with external professionals, senior management and practitioners
13. Ability to effectively record relevant information
What is interesting is that many SENCOs view the ability to develop and foster a positive and co-operative relationship with parents as important in effectively carrying out their role. This is an essential skill for SENCOs and is fundamental for good practice as it acknowledges the rights of parents. It is of importance that early years settings involve parents in their children’s development and this is particularly the case for parents whose children have SEN/impairments. While this is a crucial part of the SEN Code of Practice, it is also the responsibility of the whole setting to disseminate information. It is nonetheless of value to note that the first step in the effective inclusion of children with SEN and impairments is viewed as the most crucial. As the 2002 report ‘Special Educational Needs: a mainstream issue’ by the Audit Commission noted the early years sector plays a crucial role in the early identification of and intervention for children with SEN/impairments. By implementing the more general inclusion agenda in early years settings, children with SEN/impairments can be effectively included into pre-schools by means of determining a child’s particular needs, offering that child support, supporting parents in understanding, coming to terms with and supporting their child’s particular need/impairment and thus creates a continuity of care later when they enter compulsory schooling.

Fewer SENCOs perceive ‘facilitation skills in order to support practitioners with inclusive practice’ as essential to the SENCO role, particularly when compared to some of their other skills/abilities. This is perhaps one of the key skills for a SENCO and would thus be of value to raise awareness of its importance through training. Although it is an issue of importance for the whole setting when providing support, this research highlights the necessity for further investigation into how this support is carried out within the confines of the SENCO role and whether training is necessary to enable SENCOs to perform this role more effectively.

A further skill viewed as important in carrying out the role of a SENCO is the identification of staff training needs and responding accordingly. If SENCOs have difficulties identifying and responding to these needs, other staff members can not support the SENCO. Such a lack of training for other staff may further contribute to the workload of the SENCO within the setting rather than alleviate it. This is an issue for all who work in pre-schools and must be acknowledged and addressed. Effectively addressing this could empower all staff as outlined in the National Standards for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators produced by the Teacher Training Agency. In order for SENCOs to be able to undertake their role and
responsibilities effectively it is essential that appropriate training programmes are available and that funding for training is available and accessible to SENCOs in order to develop their skills and knowledge.

Other skills and abilities that SENCOs identified as necessary to carry out their role effectively are:

- knowledge about child development
- experience of working with children with SEN/impairments
- the ability to empathise
- a positive attitude
- effective time management
- the ability to seek children’s views for their effective participation
- the ability to be informed on relevant SEN/impairment issues
- the ability to co-ordinate the primary transitional process.

These responses, as shown in figure 4 on the following page, highlight that SENCOs appreciate the complexity and diversity of their role and the qualities that contribute to being an effective SENCO. Fundamental to the role is the capacity for empathy and for listening to parents and children with SEN/impairments in order to determine a child’s particular needs, offer that child support, and support parents in understanding, coming to terms with and supporting their child’s particular need/impairment.
The majority of SENCOs perform more than one function within the pre-school, often being either the pre-school leader or the deputy pre-school leader. Figure 5 on the following page shows the additional roles that SENCOs perform. Only a very small minority of SENCOs (1.1%) have no additional roles within the pre-school. With over 50% of SENCOs also being the pre-school leader, the issue of workload is one of great concern. With the majority of SENCOs carrying out dual roles within the setting there is a possible conflict when allocating sufficient time for each role during the working day. Indeed, the multiple roles that SENCOs perform in pre-schools suggests that there is a need to further investigate this issue. Indeed the multiplicity of roles performed by the early years childcare workforce must be addressed within the context of workforce development with staff needing to have the opportunity to access training and retraining programmes in order to fulfil their roles. This issue was also raised in other Alliance research exploring Black Minority and Ethnic parents.
access to childcare training, suggesting that training is a cause for concern, particularly in light of the drive for qualified staff.

![Figure 5: Additional roles of the SENCO](image)

In terms of other responsibilities, a third of SENCOs indicate that they have further responsibilities to their designated role, as shown in figure 6 below:

![Figure 6: As a SENCO do you have further responsibilities?](image)

Other responsibilities cited by the SENCOs include planning and organisational functions (such as fundraising, administration duties, maintenance and building upkeep) and implementing nursery procedures, as well as more direct duties with the
children (such as extracurricular activities, being a bus escort and being responsible for looked after children), as shown in figure 7 below:

![Figure 7: Other responsibilities of the SENCO](chart)

Only a small minority of SENCOs have designated ‘SENCO’ hours and are often performing these duties in their own time or alongside their other responsibilities, as seen in figure 8 on the following page.
Many SENCOs cited multiple responses with regard to the fulfilment of their SENCO hours. This indicates that even those SENCOs with designated working hours often perform some of their SENCO duties in their own time or alongside their other responsibilities. Similarly, the respondents that do not have any designated SENCO hours often perform their duties alongside their other responsibilities and in their own time. In terms of workforce development it is of vital importance that training needs are met in order for the childcare workforce to be able to fulfil the different functions that they undertake. By the same token, it is equally important for the sector to be able to meet the demand for further qualified childcare workers who are able to manage the multiplicity of roles that the job involves.

5.2. Support from Inside and Outside the Pre-school
The majority of SENCOs are supported by their pre-school management committee, as shown in figure 9 on the following page.
Management committees provide support to SENCOs in a number of ways, illustrated in figure 10 below.

Although the majority of management committees are providing support to their SENCOs, less than a quarter of these committees access training to help them provide support, as shown in figure 11 on the following page.
Of those committees that receive training to help them support the role of the SENCO the courses accessed include: training on legislative requirements; general introduction to SEN/awareness raising; SENCO role and duties; policy and procedures; working with parents; and specific conditions/supporting needs. However there are many training courses that are accessed by management committees and this training undertaken are shown in figure 12 below:
One SENCO suggests that the training they receive would be of use to the management committee. However, frequent changes in committee members results in little stability or continuous support for the SENCO or other staff, which invariably has repercussions on training needs. However the different types of training that management committees do access reflects their desire to be as supportive as possible of SENCOs and children with SEN/impairments. What this suggests is that a volunteer programme of training for management committees further support the effective inclusion of children with SEN/impairment and support their families and the pre-school settings in meeting the needs of these children.

The majority of SENCOs have an Area SENCO designated to their setting, as shown in figure 13 below:

Of those who have a designated Area SENCO, support was given to the setting in the following ways, as detailed in figure 14 on the following page.
What becomes apparent from these findings is that AREA SENCOs are using a diverse range of methods for staying in contact with SENCOs and is representative of their desire to effectively support SENCOs in their role.

The type of support given by Area SENCOs includes giving general advice, advising on specific conditions, providing training, supporting parents, helping with funding and advising on policy, practice and procedures, as noted in figure 15 on the following page.
5.3 Training and Experience

The findings highlight that the majority of SENCOs are highly trained and are proactive in accessing relevant and essential courses in order for them to fulfil their role and responsibilities. This desire to effectively meet the needs of children with SEN/impairments can be seen in the training and experiences of SENCOs prior to the take-up of the role of SENCO.

The majority of SENCOs have accessed some training or have experience of working with children with SEN/impairments prior to taking up their role, as shown in figure 16 on the following page.
Of those SENCOs who state that they have gained knowledge and experience in other ways this is often acquired through direct experience, primarily from being a parent/carer/sibling of a child with a special educational need and/or impairment. Other areas of previous experience include being a special school governor, running a helpline for parents, being an independent parent supporter and belonging to various support groups/charities.

Of those who had no previous experience or knowledge of SEN/impairments there appears to be a feeling that this is not ideal. However this situation has arisen because no other member of staff within the setting has the necessary experience to take on the role. Given that some SENCOs have taken on the responsibility of the role without prior experience, it is of paramount importance that appropriate training is available in order for them to carry out the role effectively.

A significant majority of SENCOs access training relevant to their role, as can be seen in figure 17 on the following page.
The type of training accessed by SENCOs is detailed below in figure 18:

The training accessed by SENCOs is diverse in nature and reflects the desire of SENCOs to be as supportive and knowledgeable as possible. Of those SENCOs that access sufficient training to fulfil their role, the training programmes are organised by a number of providers, as seen in figure 19 on the following page.
Of those SENCOs that do access relevant courses a number of factors are given which act as barriers to participating in training, as shown in figure 20 below.
Thus in order to address the current situation of workforce development in achieving a more qualified workforce it is important to remove the barriers which prevent childcare workers from accessing the training required. Of particular concern is the issue of staff having cover in order for them to access training during the working week. This finding highlights both the shortages of childcare workers in the sector and the need for recruitment drives to expand the numbers of childcare workers.

Almost three-quarters of SENCOs feel that they access sufficient training to help them fulfil their role, as shown in figure 21 below:

![Figure 21: Is training sufficient to needs?](image)

However of those SENCOs who feel that they do not access sufficient training (28%) ambiguity around what is relevant for different kinds of settings and the constantly changing legislation are cited as areas where SENCOs feel the need for further training and support. The SENCOs who feel that they have insufficient training indicate that they would be interested in accessing courses/training as can be seen in figure 22 on the following page.
Many SENCOs access sufficient training but feel that it is useful to have regular updates and training in order to keep their knowledge up-to-date. A few SENCOs state that they access appropriate training but that it would be beneficial to have hands-on training where they could have the opportunity to work with more experienced SEN workers in pre-school settings to gain practical knowledge of working with children with SEN/impairment. Many SENCOs also state that further training would be beneficial, with particular topics of interest for training including paperwork, Individual Education Plans (IEPs), applying for funding, how to liaise with external agencies and how to liaise with parents. What is of particular importance to note are that the main difficulties with accessing training is ‘access’, for example for SENCOs in rural locations, and the nature of the training provided.

A number of SENCOs mention that they would appreciate access to up-to-date information and advice from specialist SEN/impairment advisory services as well as from their Area SENCO. It was suggested that a series of half day workshops covering different specific conditions would be useful at an early stage of SENCO
training in order to help them identify children with SEN/impairments in the pre-school setting. One SENCO suggests that it would be of value to get help to support children with SEN/impairments who have English as a second language.

5.4 Legislation and Policy
When considering their duties in relation to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA; 1995), the responses given by the SENCOs indicate that there is degree of ambiguity, with some having a very good understanding of the DDA and others confused by what the DDA meant for the pre-school setting (this perhaps is connected with ambiguity in the DDA itself). The quotes below highlight some of the good/average understandings and one example of poor understanding due to this ambiguity as well as the lack of clarity about the role and the lack of a job description. Responses demonstrating a good understanding of SENCO duties vis-à-vis the DDA include:

“Making sure access is possible, ..... that people with a disability are not treated less favourably by the setting.”

“To eliminate any discrimination against any disabled child, to allow the disabled the same access and rights as any other child. Making adjustments where required to enable access to all facilities for the disabled.”

“Ensuring children with a disability have equal access to building, resources and curriculum.”

Responses demonstrating some understanding of SENCO duties vis-à-vis the DDA include:

“Access for all.”

“Ensure building is accessible to everyone including doorways, toilets and all equipment.”

“Everybody is treated equally.”

“Inclusion for all children regardless of race, colour, culture or disability.”

One response demonstrating poor understanding of SENCO duties vis-à-vis the DDA:
“We have asked for the Disability Discrimination Act but have not been given one. From what I know my duties are to ensure that [with] the help from my manager we follow those best as we can.”

These responses demonstrate that there is a need for greater clarity, particularly with regard to the impact of such legislation on pre-school settings. There is some confusion then regarding which legislative acts are applicable to early years settings in the voluntary sector. Part 3 of the DDA has been enforced since 1995 and is applicable to all early years settings, whereas Part 4 of the DDA only applies to maintained nurseries and schools, and the SEN Code of Practice is only applicable to those who receive Nursery Education Grant (NEG) funding. It is thus of great importance to ensure that the applicability of these acts are clarified for all types of settings.

5.5 Additional Findings

SENCOs also cite a number of other issues that they perceive as causes of concern. One key concern is that the role of the SENCO is not viewed as a demanding position:

“The SENCOs role is a highly professional one and yet there is not enough money in the pot to pay for it!! At times it is a job in its own right and does not get the recognition that it deserves. Fortunately being supernumerary, I am able to fulfill the role efficiently, but many settings are not able to!”

“I don’t honestly feel the “powers that be” actually understand the expectations/pressures [of being a SENCO] and that too much is expected within the pre-school sector with [the] current resources available.”

“In 2002 we had the largest amount of SEN children at a pre-school setting in Norfolk (11 cases). I had to work very hard to liaise with support workers, organise and take minutes of review meetings. Review meetings were held after sessions or during lunch breaks. Reviews were generally held every half term. This meant no lunch break and evenings spent typing up minutes. Government allows no additional funding for groups with SEN children.”

SENCOs feel that they are not valued by organisations and by teachers in the primary school sector, which in turn contributes to concerns over a lack of continuity of care. This continuity of care in the transition from pre-school to primary school is of
crucial importance if children are to be effectively supported and included in compulsory school settings. Examples of SENCOs perceptions of how they are viewed by external organisations and schools are visible in the following quotes:

“Teachers generally do not accept what pre-school/nursery SENCOs have to say. This causes delay in statementing for a child and is not acceptable. Children and families deserve more!!”

“In my experience I have found that other professionals do not always understand the role of pre-school SENCO and can be reluctant to share information about individual children. I have found health visitors to be particularly uncooperative and appear to be unaware of the role of SENCO.”

SENCOs also note that even when training is accessible it is only through practical experience that it becomes meaningful:

“The training is useful and the SENCO meetings and forums provide useful contact but it only becomes clearer when you need to actually do it and put things into practice.”

“I feel that the role of SENCO is very much one that is learnt ‘on the job’.”

Many SENCOs state that the lack of opportunities to put their training into practice results in a lack of confidence. These responses suggest that although they have knowledge they are unsure of themselves:

“I have had training but do not feel confident in dealing with children with differing abilities.”

“I have never had to implement training as yet. [I] feel nervous of using training and getting it wrong! [I] feel isolated and responsible as a SENCO.”

Access to information and help is also noted as a concern by a number of SENCOs:

“A Special Educational Needs web-page would be useful with ‘topics of the week’ on various syndromes, conditions etc. and strategies to work with children who have them - maybe and [a] live chat room for an hour a day or a surgery helpline.”
“We also run an after-school, breakfast and holiday club. Our area SENCO is not allowed to become involved in this. We find this difficult as very often we picked up problems not discovered at school and have no line for advice locally.”
Section 6: Conclusion

With the inclusion of all children into early years settings being elevated in importance in recent years both in policy formulations and in actual setting practices, the Pre-school Learning Alliance conducted research on the roles and responsibilities of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in early years settings. The results from the questionnaire highlight a number of issues that are of interest with regard to good practice and the SENCO role.

It is certainly positive to discover that settings are active in appointing a SENCO. However, there appears to be a lack of clarity regarding the role, which is reflected in the lack of job descriptions available. The findings suggest that it would be useful to develop a comprehensive job description that is accessible to SENCOs and will clearly establish and identify the SENCOs' responsibilities.

It is of interest that almost three quarters of SENCOs have another role in the pre-school in addition to being a SENCO, with over half also being the pre-school leader. It is of some concern that staff in pre-school settings have multiple roles. As a result they often occupy numerous positions of responsibility and as such have workloads which reflect this. Because many SENCOs are performing multiple roles within settings it is noteworthy that less than 10% have designated hours for their SENCO duties, with the majority performing these duties in their own time and/or alongside their other responsibilities. The issue of the multiplicity of roles that SENCOs perform is one that relates to the general issue of workforce development. With the workload generated by the multiplicity of roles, it is difficult for practitioners to find the time to access training which would enable them to update their skills and knowledge in order to meet the needs of children with SEN/impairments. The experience and expertise of the early years workforce are valuable resources to draw on when considering how pre-schools care for and educate children with additional needs. In order to maintain the expertise it is essential that staff are not only able to access appropriate and timely training for their role but that they are allocated sufficient time within their working days to perform their role effectively.

There are however a number of concerns raised by SENCOs with regard to their role, which highlight potential ways in which support can be developed in order to enable SENCOs to perform their role effectively. Feelings of isolation, being overwhelmed by the role, not knowing where to get information and difficulties liaising
with external agencies are some of the issues raised. It is of importance for practitioners to be able to be part of a network whereby they can share their experiences and access support from fellow SENCOs whose experiences and knowledge can inform their role. As such, a network of support can not only enable SENCOs to feel connected to a larger community but can also be used to flag up good practice which can be implemented within their own settings. Organisations like the Pre-school Learning Alliance are crucial in helping practitioners set up such networks and in facilitating the sharing of information, experience, knowledge and good practice.

The findings indicate that the majority of SENCOs have knowledge gained through training and/or experience of working with children with special educational needs and impairments prior to taking up the role of a SENCO. Many SENCOs also have experience of being a parent/sibling/carer of a child with special educational needs and/or impairments. An important issue that emerged from the additional findings is that SENCOs are not always able to implement into practice the skills gained through training. Several SENCOs voiced their concerns regarding a lack of confidence in their abilities to put into practice what they have learnt as they have not had any children with SEN or impairments attending their setting since undertaking training. The use of networks which SENCOs could be involved in would enable practitioners to visit other settings and share information as required. Also it may be of value for training providers to offer brief update courses at regular intervals throughout the year in order to refresh practitioner knowledge as needed. Training is a valuable method of support that effectively assists SENCOs, it is important that the issue of core funding for training is addressed so that settings which are already struggling financially do not miss out on training opportunities as a result of not being able to meet the costs.

The data analysis confirms that training is accessible to most SENCOs (91%) and is perceived by the majority of SENCOs as sufficient in helping them to fulfil their roles. However, although there is a great deal of support for the SENCO role from the pre-school management committees, very few committees receive training to support the SENCO. Such training is crucial if pre-schools are to support the role of the SENCO and ensure the effective inclusion of children with SEN/impairments. These findings then inform the development of a strategy to meet the training needs of volunteers, a strategy which is sadly lacking at present. It has perhaps been difficult in providing management committees with the training they need due to funding issues. Many
pre-schools and early years settings struggle financially and as such there is little money available for practitioners and members of the management committee to access training. With early years practitioners facing a challenging task in identifying very young children with complex needs and simultaneously providing support and advice to concerned parents, effective support from the management committee can assist key workers, including SENCOs, in their role.

The findings of the research are generally positive and have been useful in identifying the main factors impacting on effectively supporting SENCOs in their role.
Section 7: Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, we propose the following recommendations:

1. **The development of a comprehensive and accessible job description for SENCOs:**
   The lack of a comprehensive and clear job description that is applicable to all SENCOs and across all settings creates a degree of ambiguity as to what the roles and responsibilities of the SENCO position are. As a result, we recommend that Government and other key agencies (the Alliance included) work together to develop a comprehensive and clear job description for this position to lessen confusion regarding the role and its responsibilities.

2. **The need for SEN placements during training:**
   While many SENCOs have direct and often personal experience of supporting individuals with SEN/impairments before taking the position of the SENCO, they state that the training provided would be of greater benefit if it were to include a work experience component, for example, one that includes shadowing an experienced SENCO in a pre-school setting. This would be of value for a number of reasons. First and foremost it would provide the SENCO with a mentor that would guide them through the initial stages of moving from training to pre-school practitioner. It would also lessen any feelings of apprehension when making the transition from training to practitioner.

3. **The need for applicable and accessible training and retraining programmes:**
   Making training programmes relevant and accessible for all SENCOs, staff, management and volunteers irrespective of location. For example, SENCOs in rural areas state that many of the courses that they would like to access are oversubscribed and not relevant for their needs. In addition to this it is recommended that the SENCO role is conceptualised as one of continuous training, that is, providing SENCOs with continuous information via newsletters or email/web on SEN conditions and impairments, latest legislative changes and how they impact on their roles and responsibilities, helplines and a network in order to share experiences and examples of good practice.
4. The need for core funding for training and retraining SENCOs:
In order for SENCOs to be able to access training/retraining it is essential that they can draw on funding. Many pre-schools struggle to finance training, having to pay not only for the cost of the courses but also for relief cover for the SENCO. Training is a valuable method of support that effectively assists SENCOs, thus we recommend the need for core funding so that settings which are already struggling financially do not miss out on training opportunities as a result of not being able to meet the costs.

5. The need for SENCOs to be just SENCOs:
Given that SENCOs, like numerous other pre-school practitioners, perform a number of roles within the early years settings, e.g., designated SENCO and pre-school leader, the lack of sufficient numbers of workers presently in the childcare sector means that many practitioners are unable to cope with the more particular roles and responsibilities that they may also have, as is the case with SENCOs. This impacts also on the ability of current SENCOs to perform their duties effectively (over heavy workloads due to multiplicity of roles) and to engage in training to bring themselves up to date with the latest developments (due to lack of staff to cover).

6. Acknowledgement of the pre-school SENCO role by other agencies/professionals
There should be greater recognition of the role that pre-school SENCOs perform and their role in the effective identification of and intervention for children with SEN/impairments. This is crucial if continuity of care when children with SEN/impairments move from pre-school settings to compulsory-aged school settings is to be guaranteed. Some key professionals (primary school SEN workers, health care professionals) do not seek the experience and expertise of the pre-school SENCO nor engage with them effectively. As a result there is a lack of continuity of support for children with complex and individual needs and hinders the effective operation of the integrated services approach espoused by Government.

7. Development of a network for SENCOs
It is of importance for practitioners to be able to be part of a network whereby they can share their experiences and access support from fellow SENCOs whose experiences and knowledge can inform their role. As such, a network of support would not only enable SENCOs to feel connected to a larger community but
could also be a forum for highlighting good practice which can then be implemented within their own settings. Organisations like the Pre-school Learning Alliance are crucial in developing such networks, in helping practitioners set up more local or particular networks and in facilitating the sharing of information, experience, knowledge and good practice. It is important to acknowledge that the development of these networks is additional to the help and expertise offered by Area SENCOs.
References


1. What do you consider your role to be in relation to the SEN Code of Practice? Please tick the relevant box(s).

☐ Legal responsibility (use the box below to give more detail)

☐ Implementation of the recommendations in the code

☐ Working in partnership with the management committee Pre-school Leader and other practitioners in relation to the Care and education provision for children with SEN/Disabilities

☐ Preparation, implementation and review of the SEN policy

☐ Resources

☐ Training

☐ Complaints

☐ SEN Tribunal

Other, please specify

2. As the SENCO do you have a job description that clearly defines this role?
   Yes ☐ No ☐ If no, please go to question 4.

3. If yes, please give details of how your job description defines your role as the SENCO.

4. What knowledge and experience of working with children with Special Educational Needs did you have prior to taking up your role as the SENCO? Please tick the relevant box(s)

☐ Knowledge gained through training (please use the box below to give further details about this training)

☐ Worked in a paid capacity with children with SEN/disabilities in a pre-school

☐ Worked in a voluntary capacity with children with SEN/disabilities

Other, please specify
5. What skills and abilities do you think a SENCO needs in order to carry out their role effectively in the pre-school setting? Please tick the relevant box(s)

☐ Effective written and communication skills;

☐ Ability to Interpret and have regard for legislation relating to children with SEN/disabilities;

☐ Ability to monitor and implement policy relating to children with SEN/disabilities;

☐ Effective interpretation of information based on observations in order to assess children’s progress;

☐ Able to use information on children’s needs to inform future planning;

☐ Ability to match pre-school provision with the needs of children with a range of different abilities;

☐ Effective identification of barriers to children’s learning;

☐ Ability to devise an IEP format to suit the pre-school;

☐ Identifying staff training needs and responding accordingly;

☐ Facilitating skills in order to support practitioners with inclusive practice;

☐ Ability to develop and foster a positive and cooperative relationship with parents;

☐ Coordinating skills in order to work in partnership with external professionals, senior management and practitioners;

☐ Ability to effectively record relevant information.

Other, please specify

6. Do you have another role in the pre-school in addition to being the SENCO? Please tick which of the following additional roles you play.

- Pre-school Leader
- Deputy Pre-school Leader
- Pre-school Assistant
- No other roles
- Other, please specify

7. Do you have any other responsibilities that you have not mentioned in question 6?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If no, please go to question 9.

8. If yes, what are these responsibilities?


9. Are you able to access training relevant to your role as the SENCO?  
Yes ☐ No ☐ If no, please go to question 11.

10. If yes, please give details about what training you have been able to access. Now please go to question 12.

11. If no, why have you not been able to access training?  
Lack of relevant training in area ☐  
Problems getting staff cover to attend training ☐  
Problems getting to training venue ☐  
Other, please specify _________________________________________________________________________

12. In your opinion do you think you have had access to sufficient training to help you to fulfil your role as the SENCO?  
Yes ☐ If yes, please go to question 15. No ☐

13. If no, what training would you like to do? Please give details below. This will help us to design training that will meet your needs.

14. Who provides the training?

15. Does the pre-school management committee support your role as the SENCO?  
Yes ☐ No ☐ If no, please go to question 17.

16. If yes, please describe how does the management committee supports your role.

17. Has the pre-school management committee received training to support the role of the SENCO?  
Yes ☐ No ☐ If no, please go to question 19.
18. If yes, please give details about what training this was.

19. What do you consider your duties are in relation to the Disability Discrimination Act (1995)?

20. Do you have time set aside for your SENCO duties or do you perform these duties in your own time and whilst also being involved with other responsibilities?
   - Have designated ‘SENCO’ hours
   - Perform SENCO duties in own time
   - Perform SENCO duties alongside other responsibilities
   - Other, please specify

21. Do you have an Area SENCO designated to your setting?
   - Yes □   No □ If no, please go to question 23.

22. If yes, how does the Area SENCO offer you support?

23. Please use the space below to give us any additional information about your role as the SENCO or about the pre-schools SEN provision that you think might be useful to us.

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please send your completed questionnaire to Special Needs Officer, Pre-school Learning Alliance, 69 Kings Cross Road, London, WC1X 9LL.
Remember, for an opportunity to enter the free prize draw we must receive your completed questionnaire by 3rd October 2003.