“If You Could Wave a Magic Wand...” - Special Educational Needs in London: Diversity, Complexity and Context

Suzanne Mackenzie


Abstract: This chapter presents an analysis of data collected – by interviews and focus groups – from staff working in special educational needs in London. The analysis highlighted challenges to respondents’ professionalism such as lack of time, paperwork and behaviour. The frustrations of the demands of policy – and how this impacted on working with outside agencies, parents, teaching assistants and others – were common and powerful themes within the respondents’ experiences. The most significant challenge for respondents in the study was working with colleagues: all participants – teachers, special educational needs co-ordinators and teaching assistants – identified communication problems, mutual misunderstandings and a mismatch of expectations as major barriers to carrying out their roles. The daily demands of working in complex local authority and school environments impacted upon their ability to carry out their roles effectively. The conclusion of the chapter identifies the significance of the study for the implementation of policies such as Every Child Matters and the Children’s Plan: crucial to the success of such policies are staffing to support special educational needs, internal communication and effective external liaison. This study demonstrates the impact of demands upon staff on a daily basis and how working in special educational needs in London brings its own particular challenges.

Keywords: Special educational needs, special educational needs coordinators, teachers, teaching assistants.

*****

1. Introduction

The role of the special educational needs co-ordinator [SENCO] has been given greater attention recently in Government announcements on special educational needs [SEN], partly due to the SENCO’s ostensibly pivotal role in SEN policy and strategy.¹ There also has been much discussion of the role of other staff in the provision of support for children with SEN and disabilities as a result of reforms such as Every Child Matters² and the Children’s Plan.³

Previous research has indicated variations in the manner in which those staff who work in SEN carry out their diverse roles, and this diversity - combined with time constraints - has meant that the working in SEN is enormously demanding.

Research findings have highlighted paperwork and the time involved in paperwork as major burdens on those working in SEN.⁴ Of more significance to SENCOs, however, was the attitudes of other staff: relationships with other colleagues were problematic for special education teachers in their workplace settings. General education teachers did not understand the role and responsibilities of a special education teacher.⁵ The attitudes of other colleagues made a difference as to whether staff would remain working in special needs education. In particular, the decision to stay within special needs education corresponded strongly with support from effective headteachers.⁶ In previous research,⁷ special needs teachers frequently reported feeling only ‘tolerated’ by their colleagues and headteachers, and felt that many of their colleagues did not understand their roles or practice. Further, some SEN staff reported facing outright hostility from their colleagues, particularly from those who resented the accommodation that special educators were asked to make for special needs students.⁸ This hostility and toleration could be compounded by issues relating to the gender of staff who work in SEN.⁹ Moreover, the challenging behaviour of special needs students has been reported to be burdensome to those staff who work in SEN.¹⁰

The following research aims to complement existing research by examining the daily experiences of working in SEN in diverse and challenging settings within London. The study will examine the effects of:

- paperwork, time, meeting parents’ needs and behaviour issues in challenging schools and local authorities in the context of limited budgets and increased pupil need; and
supporing pupils with SEN for staff working in diverse contexts. The study will also consider the challenges of working in a ‘gendered’ area of school services and the implications this has for the self-conception of those working in SEN.

2. Methodology

Evidence of increasing diversity and complexity of contexts was investigated by the use of three focus groups, comprising one group of teachers, one group of students, and one mixed group of teaching assistants [TAs] and SENCOs. The total sample size of the London-based study was thirty-three. The study used an opportunity sample based on responses to an advert placed in two major special needs magazines, the magazine of a teacher union, a personal letter to all SENCOs in an inner London borough, and an electronic request that went to all students in the university in which the author was working.

Subsequently, eight SENCOs, a specialist sensory support teacher and three TAs were interviewed, and six respondents were interviewed by e-mail. The students were undergraduates attending a London university studying modules on special educational needs and inclusion. Many were also working as TAs. The transcripts of the focus groups and interviews produced the data for analysis via NVivo and were informed by Huberman’s 1983 study, The Lives of Teachers. The use of qualitative techniques provided interviewees with the opportunity of telling their diverse stories in their own ways. The diversity of each story illustrated clearly the complexity of working in SEN within London. This helped in the reconstruction and interpretation of meaningful features and incidents in respondents’ lives. Within qualitative educational research, there is a developing body of thought concerning the connection between teachers’ private lives, the personal and biographical aspects of their careers, and how these interact and shape professional reflections and actions. The literature on teachers’ work and professional lives makes it clear that expertise, capability, personal and professional biography, situational, emotional and psychological factors, as well as the complexity of the pupils whom they teach, and changes over time and circumstance, influence their effectiveness of teachers. The longer project from which this chapter is drawn focused on many of the above challenges faced by those working in SEN, but this present chapter focuses more on the practical and everyday issues around time, paperwork and behaviour management, and moves on to look and school and local authority contextual issues.

All participants were asked to complete a consent form and were issued with an information sheet for the project. Respondents were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the project at any point. Due to the nature of the responses, some participants were concerned that they might be identified by their school or their local authority. Therefore, all identifying information has been changed, including names of participants, schools and local authorities. This perhaps has led to a degree of artificiality in the names substituted in the chapter, but this was felt to be necessary in order to render the participants completely anonymous.

3. Day-to-day challenges of working in SEN

The section that follows will discuss key issues that emerged from the data. Paperwork and time, parents and pupil behaviour were particularly demanding in the context of working in London, in schools with pupils (and parents) with complex and diverse needs.

A. Paperwork and Time

Time and paperwork were mentioned by only seven of the respondents as significant issues, which is surprising given that previous research findings have highlighted these factors as major burdens on those working in SEN. The respondents who perceived paperwork as a significant issue were SENCOs, which is less surprising, as paperwork is often perceived to be the most arduous aspect of the role.

One SENCO, Colin, discussed the importance of having time out of the classroom to carry out his duties as SENCO whilst also maintaining some teaching.

Colin (Primary SENCO),

I think you cannot do the role of the SENCO in your own class. It needs to be a non-class based job - or if you get enough time out of class - to do the job to the best of your ability. Like I said before, some days are very quiet but some days can be very very busy and they demand things, they put demands on the job like deadlines, you can’t do that… In saying that I do believe that SENCOs should have a role in the classroom in a sense of maybe booster classes or small group teaching. I think that’s important, to have a role in raising attainment across the whole school…
I’ve met a lot of SENCOs who don’t teach and I find that hard to believe really, but they say, “It’s all the paperwork and everything.” Yeah, it’s true, but you’re still a teacher at the end of the day.

The significance of paperwork was noted, although some staff appeared to be moving towards having an assistant to carry out some aspects of the tasks.

Colin (Primary SENCO).
I think [that the role of the SENCO] can be too demanding. I think it’s important. I think we should have assistants to SENCOs that deal that with the paperwork. I mean, I have an assistant for an hour a week and I wanted an assistant to help with the paperwork in a sense of, “Here’s the paperwork, this is where it goes in the folder, and can you please ensure it goes in the folder.”

The frustration related to the paperwork needed for statutory assessment was remarked, and how much time it took to access any resources that might be made available in inner London local authorities, as demonstrated by this interview with Colin (Primary SENCO).

What kind of things do you like least about working in special needs?

The process, the amount of time it takes, frustration that you have to fill in a long application for exceptional resource funding when it’s blatantly clear there is a problem, and also the fact that you get - if you do get accepted for it - that you have to wait a whole term for it.

If you were to change the process what kind of things would you change?

The application and the length of time it takes to actually get to the professionals in that are required.

Paperwork was seen as particularly important due to the increasing number of children identified as having SEN in London schools:

Colin (Primary SENCO).
…the person on the other end of the line or in your meeting expects you to know what the children are like, especially if you are on the transition and they’re going to year 7. Depending on the size of your school they’ve got about 500 pupils and they want to know probably about 150 that are on the special needs register, school action, whatever, IEP, and they expect you to know what the difficulties are and everything.

Three SENCOs commented that the paperwork was a deterrent to those considering a SENCO role. As articulated by one of them:

Colin, (Primary SENCO).
I think [teachers] will be put off by the amount of paperwork and what it requires.

Perception of lots of paperwork put off one particular teacher in wanting to move into the SENCO role:

Penelope (Secondary classroom teacher).
To be blunt, [what I like the least is] all the paperwork and having to struggle with reticent colleagues who don’t want to teach students with SEN. I’m not too keen on [the SENCO role] anymore.

Although paperwork was seen as somewhat burdensome, its importance was recognized:

Jane (Primary TA).
While some of [the SENCO role] is paper-pushing it’s important paper: pushing it’s getting the resources in, getting the money there to pay for the support.
One SENCO noted that what she liked least about working in SEN was that it was ‘Bureaucratic, too much paperwork’.

Linda (Secondary SENCO).
I wouldn’t encourage anyone to be a teacher these days but if they were seriously thinking about it I’d explain a typical day’s/week’s work as being a SENCO and the demands put upon you, the difficulties in trying to juggle things in the workplace but emphasise the rewards when you see something “click” in a child. I like what I do despite the frustrations!

Another SENCO, when asked about what could be changed, noted the constraints of time and paperwork.

Caroline (Primary SENCO).
I think as well - because there are always so many things that teachers are asked to do - that is difficult. So I think giving people more time in a less crowded day - so that they could, you know, think of a bit more about the SEN children in the class. And I suppose you would reduce the amount of paperwork because that is kind of changing slowly - some of it is beginning to disappear. Yeah, more time.

Overall, paperwork was recognised as an important (although burdensome) aspect of working in SEN, due to the increasing numbers of children with SEN in London schools, and the consequent complexity of liaison with external agencies.

B. Parents

The challenges of working with parents in Inner London schools was addressed by two respondents, particularly in the context of increasing pupil mobility and diversity.

Colin (Primary SENCO).
What I find very difficult is explaining to parents of different cultures, the... especially the Asian culture. And you have the language barrier problem but, fortunately, I’ve been lucky in that we’ve got translators within our school that can do that... I think that’s going to be an ongoing problem in Eastborough because they’re so many cultures. [Pupil mobility] makes it worse in the sense that you want to make the referral but before the actual referral gets back to you they’ve gone and it’s a shame because it’s a long process. It takes about four weeks to get a reply back and, when you get a reply, you think, ‘Yeah, things can get moving.’ That’s if they moved to another school within the borough. Okay, you’re in the same borough but you have to transfer all that information to that person child then have to start building new relationships and it just goes round in a circle.

The respondent went on to discuss a recent difficulty with a parent and the frustrations this could bring.

You’re so frustrated and you think to yourself, “Is it actually worth all the time for?” I mean, an example was there was [a] meeting arranged, a lot of people gave their time and the parent didn’t turn, wasn’t going to turn up, so I actually had to persuade him to. So I rang up and said, “Come down here now because there’s a massive meeting.” And that was harsh but, at the end of the day, it’s for the child.

Two respondents, however, did point out that working with parents could be a rewarding part of the job.

Siobhan (Primary SENCO).
The parents do still email me now and ring me and my mobile number. You have a relationship with the parents, properly. It’s not just a job, you know. They know [that] you love their children and you want... and you know my other colleagues. That’s why I work in the field.

Lorna (Secondary SENCO).
Back to what [I] was saying about the SENCO role, a lot of it is awareness-raising, information-giving, being an advocate for students and perhaps the parents who don’t always access the usual channels.

C. Behaviour

Only one SENCO and one focus group touched on behaviour as a significant challenge, perhaps partly because staff who work in SEN perceive it as part of their role to deal with challenging behaviour and, therefore, not as burdensome as other studies have found. One SENCO, however, did see it as the most challenging aspect of her job.

Caroline (Primary SENCO).
I think the most difficult thing probably is behaviour, because it can just be very wearing if you’ve got a child who is finding it very difficult to behave in the classroom. It’s just challenging, finding ways round it, to keep on working at it.

The gendered nature of behaviour was discussed by one SENCO, and whether gender was a significant factor in managing challenging behaviour.

Colin (Primary SENCO).
The strategy [in my school] was to get good teachers regardless of whether you’re male or female. In the last school it was interesting that the upper school we had predominantly male [teachers] and in the lower school is predominantly female, and that that is deliberately done due to behaviour […] I don’t think it’s the gender you are [that makes you deal more effectively with behaviour] I think it depends on your personality and character. I mean that in my present school there are some men who don’t need to shout, they speak softly all the time and saying that, there are some women teachers that have a strong personality and it comes out, so I don’t believe I really think that a people that think oh that’s because you’re a man you can deal with behavior better but then again I believe that females can deal that behaviour because they’ve got that that maternal instinct.

Responses from TAs focused more on the impact of behaviour, perhaps due to their role in dealing with individual pupils on a day-to-day basis. Surprisingly, behaviour was not such a negative issue for individual TAs in interview, despite the previous literature on the challenges of behaviour management, but this may be because they are expected to deal with it as part of their role of working in SEN and often take on a more sociological/environmental discourse in explaining the causes of behaviour. However, there was greater focus on behaviour by the TA focus group, but this could be an artifact of the focus group method during which an initial mention of behaviour issues sparked off wider discussion, with respondents sharing many anecdotes in the focus group setting. The fact that this focus group was comprised mainly of TAs means that there was a commonality of experience, and participants felt relaxed with one another, leading to a greater focus on this particular issue. Respondents recognized that, although behaviour was an issue, especially in London schools, a wider perspective on the causes of behaviour problems was needed.

Una (Primary TA).
I’ve been at my school for 9 years so I when went in there I couldn’t believe the children. In Easttown, the school I’m in, there’s quite a lot of children with behaviour issues. I couldn’t believe it. I know when I was in school years ago there didn’t seem to be anything like that: you didn’t run out the class, you didn’t answer the teacher back, you didn’t throw a chair. But now it all seems, all the children seem to have so many issues, and then it comes out in behaviour or… and then the children will play up [or] perhaps, somehow, they know how to play the system, how to play the teachers, how to get out of class.

Angela (Primary TA).
I think a lot of that, though, is because children now are more aware of what their rights are, and I think a lot of teachers do, or have done in the past, they do see it as just naughty, just naughty children, you know. A lot of teachers never looked beyond the being naughty. I know with the experiences with my son - he goes to a school for… a special school for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties - and
he went to a mainstream primary and, at one point, it was a split placement but, you know, my experiences with him was very much when he was younger, ‘He’s just being naughty, it’s just for attention.’ And you know, they didn’t look for any environmental factors, it was just a naughty child, and sometimes, if you look beyond that, it’s a very different picture.

Some TAs perceived working with children with behaviour problems positively, and discussed behaviour in its wider social context.

Angela (Primary TA).
With behaviour you, kind of, you’ve got a starting point and then you can see a progression and then you’ve got a different - often a different - finishing point and you can actually feel like you’ve done something and you’ve improved something and you’ve helped that child to progress.

Una (Primary TA).
I think I’ve a lot of patience with the children with behaviour problems and, I mean, I don’t want to say that they are a challenge, but I like something that makes me think or try to use strategies to keep them… calm them down. I get on with the children very well, those with difficulties. And thinking about my own childhood, when there wasn’t anything like that… and also my daughter is quite privileged… a lot of these children have issues. Where we live, in Easttown, it’s not the most affluent area and I just sometimes feel that I just want to take all the children home, you do, you know what I mean? You get that sense that you just want to look after them. Maybe that’s the wrong attitude to have, I don’t know, but I do like the naughty children.

4. Attitudes of staff

Colleagues posed challenges for all respondents in the study: whether special educational needs co-ordinators, teachers or teaching assistants, participants identified obstacles posed by colleagues - communication problems, mutual misunderstandings and a mismatch of expectations - when performing out their roles.

A. Teaching Assistants

TAs often pointed to negative attitudes of colleagues towards inclusion, especially when they observed non-inclusive pedagogy. Attitudes towards TAs as staff were often perceived to be gendered (see below). Five participants noted negative or stereotypical staff attitudes to children with SEN, whilst themselves displaying a discourse of ‘care’ in their own descriptions of their work. TAs considered some practice in schools to be a form of internal segregation.

Femi (Primary TA).
Some of them [children with SEN] are excluded within the class, they [have] arranged a class in such a way that the child sits by the corner and doesn’t participate in the learning with the peers so that, again, I think affects the child.

Keisha (Primary TA).
There is a lot of unfairness. The experience I had before I started uni’ with a child with Downs Syndrome… Most of the time, they are being ignored, and its seeking more attention and I don’t have it, I have other children to attend to, and you find out that… that the child needs a one-to-one [sic] all the time because that is the only way you can, you know, make him or her to understand a bit. But, you see… but some of them need extra more care and these Downs Syndrome [sic].

Jill (Primary TA).
I think sometimes they set unrealistic expectations as well. I mean, the specific child I was talking about before, their LSA had been told that they are not allowed to hold her hand and I’m thinking, “Why, why?” Because they have a policy of not holding the other children’s hands unless they are hurt, or walking down the street or whatever. But she’s not of that ability. Her natural reaction is, if we’re going somewhere, you’re going with me, and I’m holding my hand out. And I just think it’s a bit, you know. They’re not allowed to sit her on their lap, and it think it’s a bit sad.
because she is not of the maturity yet to understand. It’s not expected of other children, and I just think, you know, they are still little. I mean, they’re only 4 years old anyway, and I don’t think that should be expected of any of them, especially someone with a special need.

Tensions within TA groups sometimes caused problems within schools, and one TA reflected on the gendered nature of relationships between teachers.

Jane (Primary TA).
I don’t like the dynamics of working in a school. I don’t like the all-female environment and the cattiness that goes along with it, and all the hierarchy - ‘We should be doing this, we should be doing that’ - and you should do that and you should bow to this one because she’s been there fifteen years and they’ve got so much experience.

Some SENCOs saw TAs as ‘caring’, sometimes to the detriment of the academic aspects of their work.

Caroline (Primary SENCO).
I make it very clear to the point of saying in meetings, you know what you are doing is good, but they’ve really got to develop some independence. And I’d try and keep an eye on what sort of happening in the rooms as well, and it has got better and it’s kind of a natural instinct of people to want obviously …a mothering instinct.

The increased complexity brought about by changes to staff roles was remarked, and how these changes affected mainstream staff’s attitudes towards SEN.

Kay (Primary SENCO).
One teacher, her face fell, and I was like, ‘What? What’s wrong?’ And she said, ‘I’m really sorry but, whenever I see you, I just think of another job that you’re gonna give me to do.’ And I just think often, you know, that’s how it’s perceived by teachers. But certainly, with support staff, I just remember a few years ago, there was all this business about contracts in Eastborough, about the changes. And, often in many places that I’ve worked in, it’s Learning Support Assistants who are working with, like, autistic children and things like that, and then they were the teaching assistants who were, like, working in the classroom. Now there seems to be this hierarchy.

B. Headteacher attitudes
One respondent who was working in support for pupils with sensory difficulties remarked the negative influence of her headteacher, particularly the perception that work in SEN was valued. This was often reflected in the attitudes of other staff (see previous section).

Maria (Secondary, sensory support teacher).
I’m quite unfulfilled. I have a really easy day with the kids but I don’t feel in that rigour towards what I do: I don’t really think anybody cares about it. The headmaster doesn’t involve himself in any areas to do with inclusion. And he doesn’t come and see the unit. OFSTED didn’t even bother to come in and see us as all while they were there, which I found rather surprising and disturbing. And there doesn’t seem to be any sense of urgency or importance. I… we all get the same impression, actually, that mainstream look at us and think, ‘Well, we don't have to bother with John or Anne because they've got the support teachers, there they'll differentiate.’ But we can't differentiate, we don't know what the teacher is going to do from one minute to the next, so they won't come up and see us and we don't go down and see them: because of this there isn’t any joint planning.

The SENCOs in this study felt that their role was misconstrued, or that there was a general lack of understanding of SEN issues. In a time of increasing demands on all teachers, and an increasingly diverse working context, it was felt that teachers did not have an understanding of SEN issues, either due to lack of interest or, in some cases, a lack of time, as mainstream teachers find themselves overwhelmed by the challenges of working in an urban context.
Caroline (Primary SENCO).
[The hardest aspect is] I suppose, being that person that liaises with everybody, so you
are trying to liaise with parents and other professionals and, then, teachers - class
teachers and support teachers - and sometimes you, sort of, you try and pass things on.
They don’t always get done, at one end or the other, and that can be a bit frustrating.
And sometimes it can be a bit difficult working with parents who don’t who aren’t
terribly supportive, but equally staff sometimes.

Additionally, the increased demands of working in London were reported to be contributing to
increasing resentment on the part of the mainstream classroom teachers.

Siobhan (Primary SENCO).
[The SENCO role is] a hard job to do, and it’s a very hard job to do well… It
probably depends on the school: one, because of the funding issues; two, because of
the number of children with special needs and the complexity of need. And you’ve got
children coming in, now, from all over the world as well, particularly with children
coming from eastern Europe … And then it’s very difficult for teachers because they
haven’t got any support in their class because, in my last school, they used to… all the
support was tied up with statements and so, then, teachers become resentful, even if
they’re good teachers. They’re, like, ‘Well, last year we all had our own teaching
assistants and now all our teaching assistants are being taken up by statemented
pupils.’ And you think, ‘Oh god, how am I going to manage because we’ve got all
these kids in our classes, we just aren’t getting any input and support’. Most SENCOs
aren’t qualified for the job, have no training. A lot of authorities are running down
their advisory services and, even then, the advisory teachers are not… I’m not sure
how qualified they are in special needs, even if they… that’s their area. So it’s a pretty
dire situation at the coal face.

SENCOs, teachers and TAs all pointed to what they perceived as generally negative views
towards children with SEN that were held by other classroom teachers. Carol, an existing primary
teacher and aspiring SENCO, expressed what, for her, was the most frustrating thing about working in
SEN.

Carol (Primary teacher).
[The hardest aspect is] Being unable to change people’s attitudes to SEN. I strongly
believe children with SEN must be included in activities at school, but others believe
that nothing much can be done to ‘help’ the child.

The teacher/aspiring SENCO focus group also noted this frustration.

Lisa (Secondary teacher).
And I think, maybe, in our thinking, we’re light years ahead of the class teacher, if
you like, in that we are working in a different model in the school that we’ve been
placed in. It’s how we move people on from one stage to the next stage. You’re
dealing with prejudice, aren’t you, and a reluctance to accept that the children are
correctly placed, all those sorts of things. It’s a very complex operation to be able to
explain to people.
Tracy (Secondary teacher).
And you’re isolated.

Lisa (Secondary teacher).
Yeah, no-one shows you how to do these things!

In some schools, staff working in SEN felt undervalued and, again, the association of SEN work with supposedly female qualities of ‘caring’ and ‘nurturing’ were brought out.

Maria (Secondary sensory support teacher).
So, you know, I’ve got a lot of expertise, but I’m treated by mainstream in a very patronising way and I think they think I’m some sort of Mum who’s doing this job for a bit of pin money and I’m not. I’ve got probably more experience than they have.

TAs in particular felt that they were often seen as ‘nurses’, rather than as education staff, as demonstrated by this focus group exchange.

Angela (Primary TA).
Working in SEN generally, I don’t think people see it as an intellectual job. I think, a lot of the time, you are just classed as an extra pair of hands even if you work…

Elaine (Primary TA).
… a nurse.

Angela (Primary TA).
Yeah.

Elaine (Primary TA).
… a nurse, because we work with children who had really bad medical needs, who were seen as more a nurse rather than a…

Angela (Primary TA).
… a carer.

Elaine (Primary TA).
Yes.
Angela (Primary TA).
... more than a [teacher].

Elaine (Primary TA).
Yeah, because they didn’t, at the school - I don’t know if it’s changed ‘cos I haven’t been there for a few months, but when I worked at the school - it was more needs rather than the curriculum. I think I must have seen children, like, being read a story to about 5 times and painting and things like that. It was more, ‘Right, we need to do catheters. We need to do the tubes. We change their nappies. It was more...

Una (Primary TA).
Did they have nurses in?

Angela (Primary TA).
Yes.

Elaine (Primary TA).
They had nurses in, but I was trained to do diazepam for epilepsy, I was trained to do catheters, other needs, things like that. So I was more of a nurse.

When asked about the biggest barrier when working in SEN, one SENCO remarked those ‘barriers and constraints caused by a lack of understanding of real SEN issues by line management/local authority etc, the fact that interventions for SEN pupils are primarily influenced by budgetary issues, and the stigma attached to SEN’ (Shanelle, Secondary SENCO). Another SENCO noted that some colleagues defaulted to integration rather than inclusion for pupils with SEN.

Julie (Secondary Pupil Referral Unit Co-ordinator).
Personally speaking, what I have found that has not changed is the reaction of some teachers and support staff. While schools are rushing to self-identify as “inclusive” schools, the comments of some staff show that they still have notions of forcing integration into the school’s regime for children with special needs. I still am having to remind staff about what inclusive practice means and trying to get them to make the necessary adjustments in planning and resourcing to meet the needs of children with SEN.

Liaison with external agencies was seen to be important, although it could be problematic. External liaison, given recent policy changes, has become a much more demanding aspect for those working in SEN. The problems of working with local authorities (LAs) in London were touched on by several respondents, although most were sympathetic to the demands being placed on LAs.

Colin (Primary SENCO).
I understand it’s not always... is not their fault, it’s just the way things are. It’s just that I get a bit frustrated when a child comes to your school and [it] is very clear that they are working well below the national average and nothing’s being done about it. At the moment, we have a child in year 5 who has missed school in a huge style. That’s not on, and I know it’s harsh words to use for someone to have slipped through the net. I wish other schools could actually say, you know, be honest about it instead of trying to justify that they have done their best. We are not here to blame each other, we just need to be honest with each other and say we need to do something fast, but there’s no fast response to those sort of the problems. The educational psychology input is very good. The service that I have a problem [with] is the NHS who seems to have dumped all their problems on us without training and expect us to follow programs. It’s just not on really, I mean, and we haven’t got the manpower to actually deliver any of the program.

Liaison was perceived as the most difficult part of the job by Caroline, and liaising on a whole-school basis has become increasingly demanding, given the greater diversity of need in mainstream schools.

Caroline (Primary SENCO).
I suppose one of the most frustrating things is the length of time it can take if you make a referral to an outside agency and that is not anybody’s fault, they’ve got lots of children to see. That, sometimes that can be a bit frustrating.

For Caroline, the problems of working in SEN in London were partly attributable to problems with liaison with external agencies.

Caroline (Primary SENCO).
If you could wave a magic wand you’d obviously reduce the time you wait for referrals, by magically creating speech and language therapists and things like that. And, I don’t know really, I suppose sometimes there’s a sort of resistance around things and I think you would want to try and change people and give people more time to be able to take these things on.

For one outer London Primary SENCO, the stresses associated with the role were exacerbated by a lack of local authority support.

Siobhan (Primary SENCO).
Somebody said to me the other day that SENCOs only do the job now for the maximum three years and, when I look around, present SENCOs, the stress… [Teacher’s name] in my school, he’s been off with stress. In our authority we’ve got no special needs advisers, they have just gone and they’re not saying how they’re replacing them, and so it’s all very well saying ‘inclusion’- how are we get to do it?

A secondary school SENCO concluded that the consequences of the pressures of working in London were that SEN staff were becoming ‘plate jugglers’.

Lorna (Secondary SENCO).
[You have to be a] very good plate juggler. I do feel that you do have to have a multi-track mind. I do find, in the day, I do have to switch very quickly from all kinds of things: from working with individuals to talking to parents… Today, I saw a student about aspirational grades, and I’m going to have to talk to the Deputy Head on that… and you know I’ve got a parent, I’ve got somebody from the LEA ring me up… So it is a lot, you do need to hold to a lot of different kinds of roles in place and be prepared not to say, ‘I’m gonna do that and then I’m going to do this.’ You have to kind of have it… all the plates spinning, I should say rather, plate juggling.

5. Conclusion
This study has shown that those working in SEN in London are faced with complex and diverse problems, arising partly from the particular challenges of multi-agency working within London local authorities. The diverse populations, and particular challenges of working in London, give rise to frustrations around paperwork, behaviour, relationships with parents, and the attitudes of colleagues.

Respondents notably discussed their own work within a ‘caring’ and ‘nurturing’ discourse which appeared to be very meaningful to them, and they believed themselves to be ‘caring’ and ‘nurturing’ and, therefore, more suited to working in SEN. However, female respondents also contended that other, non-SEN staff made presumptions about them regarding their ‘natural’ appropriateness of working in SEN due to their being female: they felt that their work was devalued and gendered insofar as they were viewed as carers and nurturers rather than academic support workers. Discourses of ‘caring’ were quite strong within the student group, with students in particular describing work in SEN within a ‘caring’ discourse. This, perhaps, reflected qualities of the respondents: nearly all were female, older, and had children themselves, and were working in a TA role that is often presumed, perhaps incorrectly, to have a ‘caring’ dimension which predominates.

Although no respondents in this study referred to leaving the profession, it is possible that the increased demands of policy initiatives such as Every Child Matters and the Children’s Plan may lead to an increase in those leaving special needs work. This would replicate the trend in America, where policy changes have lead to a shortage of special educationalists. The tensions and frustrations referred to in the study could threaten the successful delivery of policy, as effective multi-agency working and strong intra-school relationships are vital to the delivery of policy on a day-to-day basis. Recognition of the particular challenges of working in London schools is needed within SEN policy if the currently committed but overstretched workforce is to be retained.
Author’s note: I would like to thank the TAs, teachers, SENCOs and students who gave up their valuable time to participate in this research project. I would also like to thank Dr. Lynn Ang and Dr. John Trushell for their invaluable comments, constructive criticism and encouragement throughout the writing of this chapter. My thanks also go to Dr. Tom Burt for discussion around the initial ideas.

Notes

7 Mackenzie, op cit.
15 Crowther et al, op. cit.; and see also Lingard, op. cit., Cowne, op. cit., Czwed, op. cit.
16 Mackenzie, op. cit.
17 MacBeath et al., op. cit.
19 Department for Education and Skills, op. cit.
20 Department for Children, Schools and Families, op. cit.
21 Billingsley op. cit.

Bibliography


Jones, P., ‘“They are not like us and neither should they be”: issues of teacher identity for teachers of pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties,’ *Disability and Society*, vol. 19-2, 2004, pp. 159-169.


*This document was added to the Education-line collection on 19 January 2010*