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**Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in New Zealand Secondary
Schools:
Roles, Responsibilities, and Agency**

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of
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at
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Abstract

Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in New Zealand secondary schools are responsible for supporting students with identified additional educational needs, amounting to as many as 700 students (up to 30%) in some larger schools. Despite the scale and importance of the role, there is currently no dedicated funding, no formalised job description, and no mandated qualifications or training for SENCOs. Furthermore, a review of existing New Zealand literature reveals a notable absence of research into the SENCO role at the secondary-school level. Compounding this lack of recognition, the inclusive education sector in New Zealand is under increasing pressure. Literature highlights a rise in the number and diversity of students requiring support, driven in part by New Zealand's ambitious inclusive education. These changes are placing further strain on an already resource-limited sector.

Grounded in constructivist theory, and using relational agency as an analytical lens, this study was motivated by the need to explore how SENCOs in secondary schools understand and navigate their roles within this complex and evolving context. By highlighting the voices of those in SENCO positions, the research seeks to better understand their lived experiences—experiences that have often gone unacknowledged by the Ministry of Education, school leadership, and even SENCOs themselves. The research was conducted in two stages. The first involved an electronic survey distributed to secondary school SENCOs in the North Island of New Zealand, designed to capture a broad understanding of who SENCOs are and what their work entails. The second stage consisted of a longitudinal case study involving three SENCOs, with nine semistructured interviews conducted over an eight-month period, to capture rich data about their experiences. Data was dealt with descriptively and analysed thematically.

Findings highlight that the SENCO role is overwhelming, physically and emotionally taxing, and extends well beyond regular school hours. Participants reported being constantly available and shouldering significant emotional and administrative burdens. Participants also identified an increase in the range and numbers of students that SENCOs are required

to support. The study raises concerns about whether school leaders and policymakers fully understand the scope and diversity of the needs SENCOs are addressing.

This research contributes to a previously underresearched area by documenting the realities of the SENCO role in New Zealand secondary schools. It concludes with three key findings and accompanying recommendations for school leaders and the Ministry of Education.

These recommendations include formalisation of the SENCO role, recognising the importance of relational agency, support from leadership, and a reconceptualisation of the SENCO role title and definition of additional learning needs to more accurately reflect the breadth and importance of the work SENCOs perform.

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Glossary of Key Terminology and Abbreviations

Board of Trustees—“The board is the group of people that make the big decisions and set the overall direction of the school. Every state school, state-integrated school or kura has a board” (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2025, p.1). According to the MoE (2023), the school board is responsible for:

- Policies and procedures;
- Planning for the future;
- Employing all school staff;
- Complying with the law; and
- Managing budgets.

Kura—the Te Reo Māori word for “school”

Inclusion or Inclusive Education - adapting the education system and environment to remove barriers so all learners can participate and achieve. It reflects a rights-based and equity-focused approach, positioning schools and educators as responsible for responding to diverse learner needs.

Inclusion Policy—inclusion of students with special educational needs involves “including” these students in mainstream schools/classrooms rather than being educated outside the mainstream school/class (MOE, 2024a).

Learning Support Coordinator (LSC)—the LSC is a new position established by the Ministry of Education from 2020 onwards. The MOE (2019a) defines the role as follows:

LSCs are an in-school role that will work to ensure all learners – including those with disabilities, neurodiversity, behavioural issues and who are gifted – get the help they need. The LSC is an additional, full-time, dedicated role, not an add-on to existing classroom teaching or management responsibilities. They may work across several smaller schools. (para 1)

Learning Support Delivery Model (LSDM)—this is a new model created by the Ministry of Education (2019b) to roll out the changes for special education in New Zealand schools. The MOE (2019b) states that this model is based on overseas best practice and other New Zealand models that “highlight the value of flexibility and responsiveness to the local community” (para 2).

Mainstream Schools/Classrooms—mainstream schools/classrooms are those in which all students are educated alongside each other. There is no segregation of those with special educational needs (MOE, 2024b).

Secondary School—New Zealand secondary school provides schooling for those students from Years 9–13 (students approximately aged 13–18 years). However, some secondary schools start at Year 7 (students aged approximately 11 years).

Senior Leadership Team—the leadership team managing a secondary school, often made up of a principal, deputy principal(s), assistant principal(s), and sometimes an executive officer or property manager.

Special Education Needs (SEN)— Special educational needs (SEN) or special education focuses on individual learners’ difficulties or deficits and is often linked to diagnosis, additional support, and historically, the categorisation or segregation of students.

Throughout this research, I will use the definition supplied by the New Zealand Ministry of Education. Special education in New Zealand was defined by the MOE (2000) as “... the provision of extra assistance, adapted programmes or learning environments, specialised equipment or materials to support young children and school students with accessing the curriculum in a range of settings” (p. 2). Therefore, in New Zealand, special education refers to the assistance, modifications, and adaptations of learning programmes, resources, and environments designed to support children and youth with special education needs and/or disabilities.

The MOE (2012) later clarified this definition of learners who have learning needs: “Learners with special educational needs/disabilities have a range of impairments which affect their ability to learn and achieve at school” (para 7). These impairments may include physical, sensory, cognitive, psychosocial, and behavioural issues or a combination of these. Furthermore, the MOE (2012) specified that educational needs are “any need that cannot be met within a regular early childhood, school, home or family setting without extra support” (para. 8). The children requiring special educational support have a range of needs that cannot be met in educational settings without extra assistance. These clarifications emphasise that these special educational needs require additional classroom and resourcing support. Interestingly, this definition of special education in New Zealand still stands twenty years later. Following the practice of Cowne et al. (2019), I will refer to these students as “students with special educational needs” (rather than “special educational needs students”).

Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO)—the individual who oversees learning support across the school (MOE, 2024a).

Special Schools (NZ)—schools that are primarily for the education of students with special educational needs in New Zealand. Within these schools, students with special education needs are separated from the general student population and educated in separate schools. These schools are either completely separate (on their own site) or satellite (a special classroom on the site of a mainstream school; MOE, 2024b).

Teacher Aide—teacher aides assist teachers in a classroom by working with students on a one-to-one basis or in groups.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi - The Māori-language text of the Treaty of Waitangi (1840), regarded as Aotearoa New Zealand’s founding document, which establishes a partnership between Māori and the Crown and affirms commitments to protection, participation, and equity for Māori.

Chapter One: Introducing SENCOs in a New Zealand Context

Being a SENCO is the hardest thing I've ever done. Everyone expects so much of us, but I don't think anyone actually understands what we do.

—Kim, case study participant, March 2021

It was during the course of this study that I sat down with Kim, a special education needs coordinator (SENCO) in a New Zealand secondary school with 900 students. It was 3.00pm on a Thursday afternoon and Kim was only just eating her lunch after a busy day managing 14 teacher aides and supporting approximately 130 students with moderate to severe learning and behavioural needs. Although this was Kim's first break of the day, our interview was interrupted within the first five minutes by a series of requests needing her immediate attention. These requests included an upset student, the principal needing her support with a student, and a teacher aide requesting urgent classroom support for a student. It was interesting to note that only one of these students was on Kim's register of formally diagnosed students with additional learning needs that the school supports. The other two students were not formally on the school's diverse learners register but were students Kim regularly supports. Following our interview, Kim planned to spend the afternoon attending a meeting with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and phoning parents to follow up on incidents from the day. Kim explains that her evening will be spent catching up on administration arising from today's events; keeping records is another thing she does not find time for within her working day. Kim's account reflects the broader experiences of participants in this research.

This study aimed to provide insight into the day-to-day realities of SENCOs in secondary schools, such as Kim. In particular, it explored the constraints, enablers, motivations, and challenges encountered across a calendar year, as well as the perspectives of those working in the role. These insights, I argue, are largely absent from the New Zealand research literature.

This chapter provides an overview of New Zealand’s inclusive education sector and the current understanding of the SENCO role. Section 1.1 introduces the context for this study, outlining two defining features of New Zealand’s special education policy—ambitious inclusion and the self-managing framework of *Tomorrow’s Schools*—and discusses their implications for the SENCO role. It also examines the contemporary context of New Zealand secondary schools and the growing pressures on the inclusive education sector. Section 1.2 then outlines the systems of funding and resourcing for inclusive education, followed by a discussion in Section 1.3 of the increasing demand for inclusive education support. Section 1.4 presents the personal and professional experiences that informed my interest in SENCOs, particularly within secondary school settings, and my motivation for pursuing this research. Finally, Section 1.5 defines the line of enquiry for this study, and Section 1.6 explains the overall structure of the thesis.

1.1 Context for this Study

This section outlines the role and purpose of the SENCO position within New Zealand secondary schools. A review of school websites indicates that various titles are used to describe the individual responsible for students with additional learning needs, including SENCO, head of learning support, and learning needs coordinator. Due to the common usage of the acronym “SENCO” internationally across England, the United States (US), Australia, Finland, and China (Asfa-Wossen, 2018), I have decided to use the term special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) throughout this thesis to designate the person with responsibility in the school for coordinating the school’s policy implementation and provision of support for students with special education learning needs (as per the MOE’s [2024a] definition).

1.1.1 Introducing SENCOs

In New Zealand, the role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) is generally understood as a school-based position that supports the implementation of inclusive education by coordinating provision for learners with additional learning needs within mainstream settings. While there are no nationally regulated role descriptions or

qualification requirements, SENCOs typically work with a diverse range of learners, including those with learning difficulties, behavioural needs, physical or sensory impairments, and neurodiverse conditions. The role commonly involves working collaboratively with teachers, whānau, and external agencies to facilitate equitable access to the curriculum and to support inclusive practices across the school, consistent with the Ministry of Education's emphasis on a coordinated, inclusive learning support system (Ministry of Education, 2019a). As a New Zealand educator, I approached this research with the assumption that SENCO role is primarily oriented towards supporting learners requiring additional support to access the curriculum, particularly those working below expected curriculum levels. While gifted and talented learners are recognised within New Zealand policy as having additional learning needs, they are less frequently a central focus of SENCO practice. Accordingly, for the purposes of this research, it is assumed that SENCOs are predominantly supporting learners requiring additional support to participate and achieve within inclusive classroom contexts.

The significance of the SENCO role has been consistently acknowledged in New Zealand educational research and government reports. The Education Review Office (ERO; 2010), for instance, characterises the SENCO position as “pivotal for ensuring that students with high needs have the learning programmes and support they need to achieve at school” (p. 13). The New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI; 2018), a union advocating for New Zealand primary school teachers, argues that SENCOs are “integral”, stating that a “SENCO in every school is an integral part of a truly inclusive education system” (p. 1). Statistics provided by the ERO (2012a) suggest that SENCOs play a regular and important role in New Zealand schools: its survey of 254 schools found that 90% of schools do have a dedicated SENCO. However, when reviewing the literature and the MOE information sources to learn more about this role, I was surprised at how little information is currently available about the SENCO's role.

To begin to understand the role of SENCOs in a New Zealand context, I contacted a representative for special education at the MOE (personal communication, August 30, 2021). The representative was a specialist service lead in the Learning Support Division of the MOE. The representative confirmed that there are no official job descriptions, formal

qualifications, or specifications for the SENCO position in New Zealand primary and secondary schools. During our phone conversation, I asked if the MOE held data about how many SENCOs are currently working in New Zealand secondary schools and in what capacity. The MOE representative explained that secondary schools are only provided with full-time equivalent (FTE) bulk funding based on their roll number and specific funding for any students identified with high and complex needs. The school then has full autonomy over how the funding is allocated to specialist roles, including the optional appointment of a SENCO position. The representative stated that the MOE does not hold information on how many SENCOs are working in New Zealand secondary schools or the specifics of their roles.

In 2017, it was reported that SENCO positions in New Zealand are not regulated or legislated. No prescribed training, qualifications, responsibilities, or procedures appear to exist for SENCOs in New Zealand schools (Kearney et al., 2017; Taylor, 2014). This appears to still be the case in 2025. Compared to the SENCO role in other countries, the SENCO role in a New Zealand context appears to be unique, particularly considering the lack of mandatory training or qualifications required for SENCO individuals and the absence of regulations or job descriptions for the role. In New Zealand, there has been no obligation for a school to appoint a SENCO and no national guidance regarding the training, contracted hours, tasks, or responsibilities of a SENCO (Taylor, 2014). Storer (2002) found that only 35% of SENCOs in New Zealand schools had formal special education training, qualifications, or professional development. Thus, schools and SENCOs have a high degree of autonomy in recruitment, role expectations, and work activities. While there is evidence that schools in other countries, such as England, are specifically funded for a SENCO position, there is no such targeted funding or staffing entitlements for SENCOs in New Zealand (Kearney et al., 2017). As the NZEI (2018) explains, “currently, there is no requirement for a school to have a SENCO position, and this position does not generate any additional staffing, management units or release time” (p. 2). Resources such as Cowne et al. (2019) and Ramshaw (2017), provide guidance for SENCO practice, no equivalent guidebooks or handbooks appear to exist within the New Zealand context.

There does not appear to be clear legislation for training or definition of the parameters of each school's SENCO responsibilities. The MOE (2012) does have a brief statement that school boards of trustees are responsible for identifying students with special educational needs, and the board of trustees' *Charter and Analysis of Variance* (mandatory reporting requirements) must identify and make provisions for these students (Taylor, 2014). Within the MOE (2010b) publication specifically focused on special educational needs, *Success for All—Every School, Every Child*, there is no role identification or guidelines for a SENCO position. I have not been able to source more recent MOE guidelines, and this also highlights the lack of guidelines and formalisation. However, to understand the characteristics of a New Zealand SENCO role, it is necessary to understand the context of additional learning needs of New Zealand students, including policy decisions, to understand the unique situation for SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools.

1.1.2 Defining Inclusive Education

This thesis adopts the terminology of “inclusive education” in preference to “special educational needs” (SEN), reflecting a shift in contemporary educational discourse from deficit-oriented understandings of learners toward a focus on the responsibility of education systems to respond to diverse needs. While the terms special education, or special education needs are used at times to reflect policy language and participant voice, the use of “inclusion” throughout this study emphasises equitable participation, belonging, and the removal of barriers to learning for all students. This positioning aligns with current national and international approaches to education, which foreground inclusive practice as a means of achieving improved outcomes for diverse learners. The role of the SENCO sits at the intersection of special education and inclusive practice, requiring both the coordination of targeted support for individual learners and the promotion of inclusive approaches across the wider school context.

The classification of additional learning needs in New Zealand appears to be broad and generalised. The MOE (2012) identifies three categories of special educational needs: disabilities (for example, hearing and sight loss and other physical impairments), students not able to work past curriculum level one, and learners struggling to work at the curriculum

level appropriate for their age group. It is interesting to note that each category relates to academic/cognitive needs and that there is some overlap. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation (OECD, 2007) also suggests three categories for learners requiring specialised learning support in schools; however, their categories are slightly different. The OECD categories include students with disabilities, learning or behavioural difficulties, and students with disadvantages. These categories suggest a broader scope of potential students requiring SENCO support. Such generic categories indicate the complexity schools and SENCOs may face when identifying students with additional learning needs who require support and with defining the parameters of their role. Based on my observations in New Zealand classrooms, a key focus for SENCOs is supporting students with challenging behaviour and mental health needs. These needs are often not formally identified by the MOE. This led me to question how individual schools and SENCOs may define additional learning needs and how this may compare to the MOE's definitions and intentions for the role. To understand such definitions of learners requiring additional support, it is important to explore two distinctive policies within New Zealand's inclusive education sector that set the country apart internationally: a strong commitment to inclusive education and the autonomy of self-managing schools.

1.1.3 New Zealand's "Radical" Inclusion Policy

New Zealand's 1995 special education inclusion policy has been recognised as being the most radically inclusive policy worldwide (Hornby, 2011, 2014) with the goal of the policy to achieve a "world-class inclusive education system" (MOE, 1996, p. 1). The onus of this policy was to provide individualised educational support for students with additional learning needs within the mainstream classroom. It is important to note that inclusion within the local, mainstream school is explained as a "right" for children, and the onus is placed on schools to provide for students, regardless of their individual needs. The development of this "world-class" 1995 policy is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

Statistics further define how New Zealand's education policy is unique in the global setting. Hornby (2014) explains:

So it may be that New Zealand has the lowest proportion of children who are educated in special education provisions in the developed world and now has one of

the most inclusive education systems in the world, with less than 1% of children educated in residential schools, specialist schools or special classes in mainstream schools. (p. 650)

Hornby (2014) claims that, in 2013, New Zealand had less than 1% of students with additional learning needs in special schools. At the time, Hornby found that Finland had the next lowest percentage with 8% of children attending specialist schools. Turning to more recent research literature to examine these claims (Education Counts, 2025), it appears that New Zealand's inclusion policy continues to be ambitious with a very small percentage of students educated in specialist facilities. According to the Education Counts website (Education Counts, 2025), as at 1 July 2024, the total number of students enrolled in New Zealand schools (Years 1–13) across primary, secondary, and specialist schools is approximately 850,999. Comparatively, in the same year, 4,195 students attended specialist schools and therefore were being educated outside regular, mainstream schools (Education Counts, 2025). Calculating these figures, only 0.5% of New Zealand's students with additional learning needs were enrolled in special schools in 2022. In Chapter Two, I draw on international government websites to compare New Zealand's inclusion rates with those of other countries, exploring whether this "radical" approach to inclusion continues to distinguish New Zealand's education system.

An outcome of New Zealand's inclusion policy was the development of the *Education Guidelines for Implementing Special Education* (Ministry of Education, 2000). This report outlined principles for supporting the inclusion of students with additional learning needs within mainstream classrooms. Among its key recommendations was that all schools should appoint a special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) to lead and coordinate support for these learners. Although this recommendation was not mandatory, it has been widely adopted—by 2012, approximately 90 percent of New Zealand schools had appointed a dedicated SENCO (Education Review Office, 2012a).

1.1.4 Tomorrow's Schools

The second distinctive feature of New Zealand's special education sector is the "Tomorrow's

Schools' policy of 1989, which introduced self-management for New Zealand schools. Rather than the traditional model of government legislation and management, this policy introduced boards of trustees, elected by parents, who would oversee the running of each individual school. As explained by the MOE (2024c), "the 'Tomorrow's Schools' reforms introduced parental elected school boards to bring parents' input to school governance and give them a way to influence their children's education" (para. 2). The roll-out of the Tomorrow's Schools policy, introduced to the New Zealand education system across the 1990s, saw the beginning of the shift towards all New Zealand schools becoming responsible for their own management in terms of day-to-day running of the school, including such issues as employment, property matters, finances, and timetabling decisions (Wylie, 2000). In accordance with New Zealand's self-managing school policy, schools are left "to develop practices based on their interpretation of the non-statutory guidance provided by the MOE" (Hornby, 2014, p. 657). Due to the self-managing nature of New Zealand's schools under this policy, school leaders have complete discretion over whether to appoint a SENCO and what contracts/job descriptions for this role look like in any school (Harrington, 2016; Kearney et al., 2007; Mitchell et al., 2010). Therefore, the appointment and job description of the SENCO role is at the discretion of the individual school principal/board of trustees and their understanding and priorities regarding inclusive education. This contrasts with the nationally regulated SENCO position as seen in other international countries, such as England (Department for Education, 2023).

A consequence of New Zealand's schools' board of trustees' ability to self-manage is that the employment of SENCOs can vary widely due to the needs and priorities of individual schools. Information on SENCO contracts, such as hours, qualifications, and responsibilities, is not held centrally by the Ministry of Education. Although these two distinctive aspects of New Zealand's inclusive education sector already justify examining the SENCO role, the growing pressures on the sector add further complexity and amplify the significance of this research.

1.2 Special Education Funding and Resourcing

As of the 2024/25 financial year, the New Zealand government plans to invest approximately NZD \$783.9 million in learning support and alternative education (MOE, 2025). This funding supports students with additional learning needs and includes services such as the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS), Early Intervention Services, and resource teachers. This represents a \$43.8 million increase from the previous year, indicating a commitment to enhancing support for these students (Eden-Mann, 2024). Overall, 40,000 to 60,000 children with moderate to high needs will be supported by these funding streams per year (MOE, 2025).

Within New Zealand's inclusive education sector, there are two levels of support for students with additional learning needs:

1. The Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS) provides funding for the top 1% of students or the students with the highest needs in the school. This funding is to provide one-on-one classroom support in the form of teacher aides and resourcing to help this student in their mainstream classroom (MOE, 2023). This targeted funding follows the student; therefore, if the student were to change schools, the funding would follow the student. It can therefore be inferred that schools are dependent on this funding and only receive this level of funding for as long as that individual student attends that particular school. Hence, funding, which is used for employing support staff and providing extra resources, can abruptly be removed with only two weeks' notice if the student withdraws from their current school.

2. Special education grant (SEG) funding is a second level of support for students who fall outside the top 3% of students but who have been diagnosed with moderate to high level needs. This funding is based on the school roll and the socioeconomic status of the school's community catchment (MOE, 2022). The SEG is not targeted to any particular student and is paid as bulk funding to the school. From this bulk funding, the school must decide how to best use this money, diverse learning needs across the school. Rather than students being individually funded, schools are provided with a bulk grant of funding to support students with additional learning needs. Schools can use this funding in the way they think is best,

and the funding is dependent on the number of students on the school roll, not necessarily the number of students with identified needs (MOE, 2022).

Having briefly outlined the context and background of New Zealand's inclusive education sector, I now turn to the specific contextual issues that served as the motivation for this research study.

1.3 Increasing Demands for Inclusive Education Support

This research is positioned during a time of change in New Zealand education, particularly in special education provisioning. New Zealand's classrooms are becoming more ethnically diverse with a higher percentage of students with English as a second language than any other time in educational history (ERO, 2018). Since 2009, nationally, the proportion of students identified as New Zealand European has dropped from 55.9% in 2009 to 50.3% in 2017 (ERO, 2018). In this thesis, the term "New Zealand European" refers to the demographic category used in national census data to describe people of European descent who identify as New Zealanders (Stats NZ, 2023). As of July 1st, 2019, for the first time ever, the number of New Zealand European students dropped to less than half of the school population in Auckland alone (Milne, 2019). This diversity brings an incredible wealth of culture, language, and experiences to the New Zealand classroom. Conversely, this increasing cultural diversity brings new challenges for educators, particularly as students with English as another language may need more support in the classroom.

New Zealand secondary school classrooms are becoming a place of diverse educational challenges, and educators are faced with a widening array of educational needs. Carpenter (2010) has called this diversity a "21st Century frontier for education" (p. 32)—a point in educational history where teachers and educators encounter a wider range of learning needs, and learners are presenting with multiple learning needs. New Zealand literature documents an apparent trend of increasing behavioural and additional learning needs in New Zealand classrooms (Carpenter, 2010; Harrington, 2016; Stats NZ, 2019). The Education Review Office (2013) advises that as many as 50–80% of learners have a learning disability, although this report states that many children may have a learning need that is (not yet) recognised by an official Ministry of Education-recognised diagnosis. In 2016, Harrington

reported that in New Zealand, at least 20 per cent (and as many as 30 per cent) of students needed some form of additional learning support at some stage of their schooling. This growing prevalence of diverse and complex learning needs signals a critical juncture for New Zealand's education system where the role of the SENCO becomes pivotal in ensuring that schools can respond effectively and inclusively.

Commentary in New Zealand media suggests a government issue with providing adequate support to students with additional educational needs. Ex-Associate Education Minister Tracey Martin (as cited in Davison, 2019) noted that not enough money has been invested in inclusive education. Detailing the need for inclusion support in the early childhood sector, Davison (2019) stated, "demand for behavioural services has risen by 21 per cent since 2013, and demand for early intervention has jumped by 15 per cent since 2013" (p. 3). Davison (2019) argues that the key issues are a lack of trained staff and quality specialist support. It was part of my motivation for this research to examine SENCO knowledge of what has been done so far to address these rising learning needs and the strains on resourcing.

Aiono (2025) presents a compelling national survey and case study analysis of New Zealand's learning support system. She states that although approximately 15–20 percent of the population is neurodivergent, only about six to seven percent of students receive publicly funded learning support—a significant inequity in access. She describes the system as "at breaking point" (p. 1), highlighting critical issues such as fragmented funding, bureaucratic hurdles, and inconsistent provision that disproportionately affect Māori, Pasifika, rural, and neurodivergent learners. Aiono reports that educators experience severe strain, including scenarios where schools are unable to meet students' basic health or safety needs due to the lack of adequate resourcing.

In response to the recognised increased strain on the inclusive education sector, in 2020, during the second year of this research study, the New Zealand Ministry of Education introduced a new special education model: the Learning Support Delivery Model (MOE, 2024b). This new model includes targeted funding for the roll-out of 600 new Learning Support Coordinator (LSC) positions across primary and secondary schools. These LSC roles

are allocated based on clusters of schools and needs of school communities. Therefore, while some secondary schools may have access to an LSC within their school, other schools will be attached to a cluster of schools and may share an LSC. These new LSC positions intend to provide additional support and resourcing for students with additional learning needs “so that children and young people can get the right support, at the right time, in the right place” (MOE 2024b, para. 1). At the outset of this research, it was unclear how the introduction of specifically funded LSC positions might affect the existing SENCO role. This raised important questions about the extent to which the SENCO position had been understood prior to these policy changes: were LSCs intended as an additional layer of support, or were reforms implemented without fully recognising existing inclusive education provisions? These uncertainties provided a key motivation for this study, which seeks to examine the current state of special education provision and to present this evidence for SENCOs, school leaders, and policymakers. A comprehensive understanding of the sector and its existing structures is, I argue, an essential foundation for any future strategic decision making or reform.

1.4 Professional Motivation for this Research

Since 2005, I have worked in the education sector in a variety of roles. I have been a parent, teacher, teaching colleague, board chair, and senior leadership team member. In each of these roles, my attention has been drawn to the role of the SENCO, particularly in recent years.

Although I am an experienced teacher, I remain concerned about my ability to meet the diverse needs of all students in my classroom. In a recent Year 10 class of 29 students, eight were formally identified as having additional learning needs, including dyslexia, attention deficit disorder (ADD), and Irlen’s syndrome. This meant that nearly one third of the class (28%) required additional in-class support. While I consider myself a competent teacher, I have relied heavily on teacher aides to help these students achieve their learning goals. Teacher aides are “an essential member of the educational team, working alongside teachers to create a supportive and effective learning environment for all students” (Te Kete

Ipurangi, 2025). However, in 2022, I was allocated just one hour of teacher aide support per week as greater behavioural needs in other classrooms across the school took priority. In such cases, teacher aide time is often redirected to address behavioural issues, which significantly impact teaching and learning. Importantly, the students receiving this behavioural support are not necessarily on the SENCO's register of students with formally identified additional learning needs, suggesting the allocation of support reflects school-level decisions that go beyond the provision and funding attached to registered students. This led to my wonderings whether similar decision making occurs in other schools in response to the needs of students and the school.

At the time this research was conducted, I held the position of Assistant Principal at a secondary school of about 1,000 students in the Auckland region. Analysing Year 9 2024 data for my school, shows that there were twice as many students below the expected level of achievement than the Year 9 cohort five years previously. It is likely that these lower literacy and numeracy acquisition levels will directly impact the work of the school's SENCO because, within her role, the SENCO is responsible for students who are achieving below the expected curriculum level. Based on 2024 data, our SENCO could therefore be responsible for up to 46% of our Year 7 to 10 students (approximately 300 students). This motivated me to query whether other SENCOs in secondary schools are also expected to support such a high number of students with education needs and how, in practical terms, SENCOs may manage this.

In my senior leadership role, the challenges of catering to students with additional learning needs become even more apparent. With almost 1,100 students, we have only been able to appoint one full-time SENCO and five teacher aides based on our current allocations for ORS funding and the SEG. Two of these teacher aides are allocated full time to individual students, so that leaves three teacher aides to cover the rest of the school. Our SENCO tries to allocate teacher aides to classes of students where there are students with the most urgent needs. Behavioural needs are deemed to have the greatest impact on a teacher's ability to teach; therefore, teacher aides are often allocated to classes with students with challenging behaviours. As behavioural needs are often situational, circumstantial, or ongoing, only those students with the most extreme of behavioural issues are funded for

extra support. This means that many of our students who present with challenging behaviour are not officially on the SENCO's register and receive no funding for teacher aide time. The demand for teacher aides leaves many of our classes and teachers without in-class support for students with needs. I have received complaints from parents seeking to understand why their child is not provided with a teacher aide in class, despite having learning needs—whether formally diagnosed or not. As a result, our school's SENCO is often supporting students who require extra help, even when they are not officially registered or diagnosed. As a line manager for our school's SENCO, I have felt overwhelmed at how to manage this situation or how to best direct our SENCO. When I asked our school SENCO how this situation makes her feel, she replied, "overwhelmed and inadequate". These experiences as a teacher and senior leader have highlighted that our SENCO, in this situation, faces immense pressure. As a leader within my school, this experience motivated me to undertake this research as I was eager to explore whether other schools are encountering the same challenges or if SENCOs and schools elsewhere have developed systems from which we, and others across New Zealand, could learn.

A brief review of social media gives some sense of the feelings of frustration from the parent community in relation to inclusive education resourcing. I found many Facebook pages and groups offering support and resources for parents of children with diverse learning needs an opportunity to seek advice. Parents on Facebook groups, such as "Special Educational Needs NZ", "Parent to Parent", and "NZ Group of Diagnosed and Undiagnosed Children", shared frustration over the lack of resources, teachers being overextended, and funding cuts. Several comments on social media mentioned the word "crisis" with a sense that there are too many students with challenging problems so that teachers (and SENCOs) are stressed. One parent said, "our special education system is broken". There was a strong sense of concern from parents that the needs of students with additional learning needs cannot be met within current resourcing restrictions and that this situation only seems to be worsening.

In supporting the SENCO at my own school, I observed the wide network of individuals and organisations with whom she interacts on a daily basis. I was also struck by our SENCO's

capacity to draw upon external knowledge and resources through established relationships with professionals and agencies, including MOE representatives, resource teachers of learning and behaviour (RTLBs), health providers, psychologists, and disability support services. This raised further questions: is such relational expertise unique to experienced SENCOs who have cultivated relationships over time or is it an essential aspect of the role itself? How do SENCOs develop and sustain these connections, and to what extent is the importance of these relationships acknowledged and supported by school leadership? These questions, grounded in the relational nature of the role, became central drivers of my research inquiry.

To add to my observations, I turned to parliamentary reports and presentations, particularly those by the Ministers for Education and relating specifically to inclusive education. My aim was to understand the level of attention inclusive education was receiving at the Ministry of Education (MOE) level. In a 2019 keynote address, Tracey Martin, then Associate Minister of Education, noted that “it’s been a number of years since a thesis was done around SENCOs” (New Zealand Government, 2019). A review of academic literature revealed only one thesis focused on SENCOs in New Zealand primary schools (Lin, 2020), with no evidence of research specifically addressing SENCOs in secondary schools. The Minister’s acknowledgment of this research gap (New Zealand Government, 2019) provided further motivation for undertaking this study.

These informal observations and my initial information gathering led me to an interest in the SENCO role, which, given the challenges I observed in my own contexts, could be facing significant strain. I questioned how much is currently known about the SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools. I also began to wonder what the policy intentions for this role were and how might the experiences of this role differ from these intentions.

1.5 Research Situated in Aotearoa New Zealand

As a piece of research situated in Aotearoa New Zealand, Te Tiriti o Waitangi was a central consideration informing both the conduct of this study and the professional contexts of its participants. While SENCO participants did not make explicit reference to Māori students in

their responses, they operate within an educational framework shaped by the principles and obligations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, including the expectation that Māori learners are recognised and supported as Māori, and that practice is culturally responsive to their identities, languages, and cultures. Existing research indicates that Māori students are disproportionately represented among those identified as requiring additional learning and behaviour support (e.g., Education Review Office, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2019), suggesting that Māori learners are likely to comprise a significant proportion of the students with whom SENCOs work. Although not explicitly discussed by participants, it is reasonable to infer that their practice involved supporting Māori students, thereby necessitating a level of cultural care that recognises Māori learners not simply as students with additional needs, but as Māori with distinct cultural identities and rights.

While Te Tiriti o Waitangi is acknowledged here as an important underpinning of both practice and research in this context, it is not explored in depth throughout this thesis for two key reasons. First, as a non-Māori researcher, I do not claim the cultural authority or depth of knowledge required to speak comprehensively about the experiences and needs of Māori students within inclusive education and practice. Second, a detailed examination of Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations in relation to Māori learners requiring additional support was beyond the scope of this study. This represents a significant and complex area of inquiry, and one that warrants dedicated, culturally grounded research. Accordingly, this thesis concludes by identifying the urgent need for further research in this area to deepen understanding and better support equitable and culturally responsive inclusive education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

1.6 Specifics of the Study

This research explores individual experiences of the SENCO role in New Zealand secondary schools, with the aim of highlighting the work of people who are contracted in this role and to make recommendations to school leaders, policymakers, and others with a stake in inclusive education. This research is motivated by a commitment to highlighting the lived experiences of individual SENCOs. It is underpinned by a subjectivist, constructivist, theoretical lens and employs thematic analysis as its methodological approach. This

research also uses the theoretical framework of relational agency as championed by Edwards (2005). Methodological choices are explained and further explained in Chapter Four.

The research questions that informed the study were:

1. What are the characteristics of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools?
2. What are the perceptions and experiences of these SENCOs of their roles?
3. How do SENCOs engage relational agency to support their work within secondary schools?

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. This chapter (Chapter One) provides an introduction to the research. The Literature Review is presented across two chapters. Chapter Two provides an exploration of the history and context of inclusive education, covering historical developments, inclusion policies, international approaches to inclusive education provision, and the SENCO role in a global context. I then outline the context of this research study, addressing contemporary issues in New Zealand secondary schools and the inclusive education sector as well as introducing the theoretical lens guiding this study: relational agency. Chapter Three focuses on research literature that outlines current knowledge regarding SENCOs within the New Zealand context.

Chapter Four introduces the methodological principles and theoretical perspectives of this research. This chapter also details the specifics of the study, examining methods, processes, and ethical considerations of the research.

Chapter Five documents the results of the first stage of the research study—the survey of SENCOs—providing some answer to the question regarding the characteristics of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools. Survey results were analysed to make decisions about the directions for the case study interviews. Chapter Six details the second stage of the

research study—the case study—focusing on three SENCO experiences. This chapter details the insights gained and themes observed during the nine semi structured interviews over the course of nine months.

Chapter Seven examines the results of the case study interview data against the conceptual lens of relational agency. This chapter explores how SENCOs use relationships in the role and the impact of relationships on SENCOs' feelings of success in the role. I also examine constraints and enablers to SENCOs enacting agency.

Chapter Eight concludes this research study. This final chapter discusses and analyses the findings alongside research literature to draw conclusions and make recommendations. Three key findings are identified, each accompanied by corresponding implications and recommendations directed toward school leaders and policymakers.

To structure this thesis, each chapter starts with an epigraph—a quote from SENCO participants. Each of the quotes (eight in total) highlights a common viewpoint or challenge voiced by SENCO participants throughout the study. The quote from Kim in the epigraph for this chapter signifies my motivations for this research study: to recognise and acknowledge the experiences of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools. I argue throughout this thesis that these experiences have largely gone unrecognised; therefore, it was important to value my participants' experiences and keep their voices at the forefront of the research.

Chapter Two: Special Educational Policy, Inclusion, and the Introduction of SENCOs

I would really like to know how much has been written or researched about SENCOs because I've searched and searched and still don't have a clue what I'm "supposed" to be doing. Do other countries have staff like us SENCOs? Do they have the same title? Do they do the things that we do? Do they struggle like us? These are the things we need to know!

—Jane, SENCO case study participant, August 2020

Jane's quote in the above epigraph was particularly striking as it revealed her uncertainty about whether SENCOs exist in other countries and, if so, whether their roles align with those in New Zealand. Her reflection suggests that SENCOs like herself may have limited access to information about international counterparts and practices. It became apparent, within my initial enquiries about this research subject, that accessing information about international SENCOs was more difficult than I had previously assumed. This literature review seeks to help bridge the gap in understanding by drawing on relevant literature to summarise historical developments in inclusive education, international responses to inclusive education provisions, and the role of the SENCO in various global contexts. Establishing this background in special education policy, inclusion policy, and resourcing decisions sets up an international backdrop to better understand the unique context of the New Zealand SENCO role.

The literature review is presented in two chapters: this chapter (Chapter Two) provides an overview of the international context of inclusive education, while Chapter Three focuses more specifically on New Zealand literature, exploring what is currently known about the SENCO role in that context. Chapter Two is organised as follows. Section 2.1 documents the societal shifts that have shaped inclusive education over time, followed by Section 2.2, which explores international responses to inclusion in order to contextualise New Zealand's distinctive approach. Sections 2.3 and 2.4 examine New Zealand's unique educational

policies, focusing first on the Ministry of Education's radical approach to inclusion and then on the self-managing framework of "Tomorrow's Schools." Section 2.5 introduces the SENCO role in New Zealand, while Section 2.6 discusses the contemporary inclusive education sector, including recent changes to inclusive education provisioning outlined in Section 2.7. Finally, Section 2.8 introduces relational agency as the theoretical lens guiding this research. Firstly, I outline the international shifts in inclusive education policies and approaches that have shaped current practices.

2.1 Documenting Inclusive Education Societal Shifts

Internationally, approaches to inclusive education have seen considerable political and theoretical shifts over the last 50 years (Carpenter, 2010; Dobson, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2010; Smith & Broomhead, 2019). These policy changes have seen an observable shift in the ways in which inclusive education is resourced internationally. Historically, special education was based on a medical model that regarded disability as a deficit requiring care and treatment (Smith & Broomhead, 2019; World Health Organisation, 1980). Before the mid-1970s, students with additional learning needs in England, the United States (US), Canada, China, India, Australia, and New Zealand were segregated from mainstream schooling (Dally et al., 2019; Fraser et al., 2005). Education provisions were made for students with additional learning needs in special schools or segregated classrooms.

Internationally, the shift toward inclusive education was underpinned by broader rights-based movements. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States played a significant role in challenging discrimination and advocating for equal access to education, influencing inclusive policy developments (Artiles, Kozleski, & Waitoller, 2011). This rights-based approach was further reinforced through international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirmed every child's right to education (United Nations, 2015), alongside international initiatives including Education for All (UNESCO, 1994) and the Sustainable Development Goals, which emphasise equitable and inclusive quality education for all learners (United Nations, 2015).

The 1970s saw the beginning of the reconceptualisation of special education needs, led by England and the US. The first international movements towards the rethinking of special educational needs away from a medical model and towards an inclusive model were in England in 1970. One of the biggest milestones was the commission and publication of the Warnock Report (Hayes, 2010; Smith & Broomhead, 2019; Stakes and Hornby, 1997; Wall, 2011).

2.1.2 1970s–1990s: The Warnock Report and a Western World Shift Away from Exclusion

Commissioned by the English Government, the “Warnock Report – Special Educational Needs: Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People” (Department for Education and Science, 1978) was one of England, Wales, and Scotland's most important milestones in the 1970s and 1980s and prompted three major changes in the inclusive education sector (Smith & Broomhead, 2019). The Warnock Report (Department for Education and Science, 1978) was the result of extensive lobbying from parents and professionals in response to societal shifts in the labelling and treatment of “handicapped” students (Shevlin, 2019). Significant shifts had been made in English society with a movement away from the labelling of children with special education needs, and the Warnock Report was the first step in legislating these changes (Norwich, 2008; Shevlin, 2019). The Warnock Report (1978) redefined the population of students considered to require additional support, moving away from narrowly categorising only those with severe disabilities to recognising a broader range of children who could benefit from additional educational provision (Shevlin, 2019). The report examined the current provisioning for children with additional educational needs and made national (and international) recommendations for changes in the inclusive education sector.

The first major change prompted by this report was the change in the language used to refer to students with diverse needs. This change aligned with a shift in societal values and recognition of the rights of the child (Stakes & Hornby, 1997). A result of the report was that the term “handicapped” was replaced by “special educational needs”, and this term is still used 50 years later in most countries.

The second major change recommended by the report was that special educational needs became viewed as a continuum. The Warnock Report recognised students with learning needs, not as a discrete group separate from other students but on a continuum ranging from those with severe needs to those with mild or temporary needs (Hayes, 2010; Wall, 2011). This change was important in recommending that those students with mild to moderate needs be accommodated within the mainstream classroom.

The third change prompted by the Warnock Report was the reconceptualisation of special educational needs being an extrinsic condition arising from the interaction of the student and their environment. The Warnock Report (Department for Education and Science, 1978) argued that learning difficulties are not intrinsic but a reflection of the social or cultural environment. This, therefore, places the onus back onto society/the school to meet the needs of each individual student rather than excluding students because of their needs.

These three recommendations signalled a dramatic change in labelling to emphasise the importance of a student's environment (extrinsic causes) on their academic potential. The educational focus turned to the causes and solutions within a student's environment rather than immediately attributing "blame" to something inherently wrong with the student (Riddell & Brown, 1994).

A key outcome of the Warnock Report (1978) was the introduction of formalised legal mechanisms to identify and support students with special educational needs, most notably the Record of Needs in Scotland and the process of Statementing in England. These documents were significant in that they established a legal entitlement to additional support, formalising the responsibilities of schools and marking a shift toward legally enforceable provision (Stakes & Hornby, 1997).

The acceptance and uptake of the Warnock Report in the 1970s is viewed as being one of the main drivers of inclusion of students with additional learning needs (Hayes, 2010; Norwich, 2008; Shevlin, 2019; Smith & Broomhead, 2019; Stakes and Hornby, 1997; Wall, 2011). The Warnock Report recommended that an increasing number of students with

special educational needs could be educated in “mainstream” schooling; however, Warnock still envisioned a need for special schools. This was the first major movement towards the inclusion of children with additional learning needs into mainstream schools and classes.

The 1970s to 1990s was a period of significant educational reform in Western countries (UK, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Europe), marked by a shift from segregated provision toward the integration and inclusion of students with additional learning needs in mainstream schooling (Armstrong et al., 2011). Major changes occurred in the US in 1975: children with disabilities had the right to receive a free and equal education guaranteed by federal law (Neilsen, 2013). This same change occurred in England in 1983 and New Zealand in 1984. The 1981 Education Act in England was significant as this was the first time inclusive education was legislated in terms of civil rights and the role of parents in decision making (Norwich, 1990). Educational reform continued in the United States in 1992 whereby mainstream placement of students with additional learning needs was offered as the first choice for parents before segregated placement (Gargiulo, 2015). Similarly, a 1984 curriculum review by the New Zealand Ministry of Education legislated the inclusion of students with additional learning needs in mainstream education rather than isolated in separate educational settings (Fraser et al., 2005).

2.1.3 1990s: UNESCO Conference and International Moves towards Inclusion

Possibly the most significant international education shift towards inclusion was the UNESCO (1994) conference, and the signing of “The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education” by 92 national governments. The conference called for “major reform of the ordinary school” (UNESCO, 1994, p. iv), and the emphasis here was for the education of special educational needs “within the regular education system” (UNESCO, 1994, p. iv). The policy emphasises education within the mainstream by including the clause, “those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools, which should accommodate them” (UNESCO, 1994, p. viii). The UNESCO (1994) policy also urged all governments to enrol all students in regular schools unless “compelling reasons for doing otherwise” (p. ix) and to give inclusion the highest priority in policy and budgeting decisions. This policy is significant with a clear call for international education policies to

move towards the inclusion of all students within mainstream schools unless harmful for the student to do so.

The UNESCO (1994) inclusive education legislation is considered the most significant international movement in inclusive education in the two decades from 1980–2000 (Kirk et al., 2000). The following section details New Zealand’s distinct and rapid response to these international movements.

2.2 New Zealand’s Response to International Movements

I turn now to New Zealand’s response to these international movements towards inclusion. This section tracks the major policy shifts and MOE-level decision making, which has resulted in New Zealand’s response to inclusion being, arguably, one of the most ambitious compared with other countries.

New Zealand moved quickly to legislate the rights of students with additional learning needs and legislate inclusion in mainstream schools. Major changes have occurred in educational policy in New Zealand, most notably in 1989 when an amendment to the Education Act stated that every student has a right to mainstream education (Brown, 1996). The first explicit New Zealand government policy was introduced in 1991 in the Ministry of Education publication, *Special Education in New Zealand: Statement of Intent*, which outlined national regulations for learners with educational needs with the intention of providing equitable outcomes for all learners (MOE, 1991).

New Zealand’s first major legislation of these rights was seen in the 1995 “Special Education Policy Guidelines”, which stated, “Learners with a disability or behaviour difficulty may receive special education when they have been reliably identified as needing alternative or additional resources to those usually provided in regular educational settings” (MOE, 1995, p. 1). The guidelines illustrate the recognition by the New Zealand Government that children with additional learning needs can have their needs met in a mainstream school, but additional provisions and support may be needed. However, there is also a note in the guidelines that these needs must be “reliably identified” (MOE, 2023, p.1) to receive

additional resource provisioning, suggesting provisioning may only be provided for official diagnoses.

Adding to the complexity of the individualised context for New Zealand SENCOs, the education system is shaped by two distinctive policies: a commitment to significant inclusion and the framework of self-managing schools. The following sections explore each policy in detail, drawing on the literature to examine their impact on inclusive education. Firstly, I explore what the literature has to say about the impact of New Zealand's high inclusion policy and the consequences of inclusion for students, staff, and schools.

2.2.1 A Commitment to Inclusion

The 1995 Special Education Policy was possibly the most significant development in New Zealand's inclusive education history because equitable inclusion became a priority in this document (MOE, 1999). The policy aimed to "achieve, over the next decade, a world-class inclusive education system that provides learning opportunities to all students" (MOE, 1996, p. 1). The 1995 policy's purpose was to provide more government funding and support and to develop a clear and predictable resourcing framework for inclusive education. Equitable inclusion is a priority in this policy: to ensure that those with additional learning needs have access to the same quality of education as all other students. In this policy, the onus was on the school to manage educational needs individually on a case-by-case basis.

New Zealand has not only responded to international movements towards inclusion but has established ambitious targets, arguably setting this inclusive education sector apart internationally. Some researchers have argued that New Zealand's education system has the strongest push towards inclusion compared with any other country (Hornby, 2011, 2014; Mitchell, 2016). As argued by Mitchell (2016), "Since 1989, the New Zealand education system has undergone extensive reforms, with the result that it is one of the most developed systems in the world" (p. 21). Looking at Ministry of Education data from 2014, of the top 1% of New Zealand's students with additional learning needs, only 33.5% were being educated in special schools. This means that 66.5% of New Zealand's highest-needs students

were being educated in mainstream schools (Mitchell et al., 2010). The impact of this ambitious inclusion policy is explored throughout this study, particularly how it impacts on the individual responsible for providing this inclusion—the SENCO.

2.2.2 A Comparison to International Rates of Inclusion

To start to compare international responses to inclusion, I looked to New Zealand’s closest neighbour—Australia. Parents of children with diverse learning needs in Australia are given the choice of enrolling their child in a special school or opting for inclusion within a mainstream setting (Sharma, 2011). In 2022, Australia reported 444,677 students with additional learning needs. Of these, approximately 89% were enrolled in mainstream schools while around 11% attended special schools or alternative provisions, such as home-schooling (Australian Government, 2025). Sharma (2011) outlines the evolution of special and inclusive education policy across Australia, including parental options for placement. He notes that families can elect to enrol children with additional needs in either mainstream settings or specialist provision, depending on their individual needs and preferences—a reflection of the parental agency embedded in current Australian policy frameworks.

Australian researchers have argued that Australia’s rates of inclusion have not changed since the 1980s. Graham and Sweller (2011) analysed enrolment trends in New South Wales government schools during the period 1997–2007. Their research shows that the percentage of students placed in segregated settings, schools for specific purposes (SSPs), or dedicated support classes grew notably. Specifically, they found that overall rates of segregation increased even as total enrolments declined, indicating a shift not toward greater inclusion but toward increased separation over time.

A recent study by Stephenson et al. (2022) analysed national enrolment data to examine the extent to which Australian students with additional learning needs are educated in mainstream versus segregated settings. Their findings indicate that approximately two thirds of these students are enrolled in mainstream schools while one third remain in special schools, units, or segregated classrooms. This reflects a persistent pattern of partial inclusion, echoing Graham and Sweller’s (2011) earlier conclusion that “the majority of

students with a diagnosis of disability in regular classes have not been ‘integrated’ at all” (p. 949). Both Graham and Sweller (2011) and Stephenson et al. (2022) argue that inclusion rates in Australia are stagnant, or even declining, in response to international inclusion movements.

Looking next to Canada, there is a clear preference for inclusion, underpinned by a strong legal and policy commitment to inclusion. Loreman (2014) argues that although implementation varies by province, inclusion is firmly embedded in Canadian policy discourse although inconsistently enacted in practice. Examining Loreman’s (2014) argument alongside recent statistics, there is still a large proportion of Canadian students with additional learning needs who are being educated in segregated learning. In 2014, approximately 26% of students with additional education needs were not being educated in the mainstream (Loreman, 2014). Inclusion Canada (n.d.) reports that 60% of children and youth with intellectual disabilities in Canada are denied the right to inclusive, quality education, meaning they are not enrolled in local mainstream classrooms. Reports such as these suggest that, although Canadian policy and law support inclusion, there is a large proportion of students with additional learning needs being denied inclusion in mainstream schools (Inclusion Canada, 2020; Loreman, 2014).

In the United States, equitable achievement opportunities for students with diverse learning needs are guaranteed in the “No Child Left Behind” 2001 Act. According to this Act, students with special education needs must have placement in the least restrictive environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Data from 2022 show that 95% of students with additional learning needs were educated in the mainstream, leaving 5% of students to be educated in special schools, private schools, and separate specialist residential facilities (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2023). For the 2022–2023 school year, this figure remained at 5% (Heasley, 2024), indicating that 5% of students in the United States are still educated outside the mainstream.

I reviewed the research literature to compare New Zealand’s inclusion rate with those of other education systems in the United Kingdom and Europe. In England, 9.3% of students with additional learning needs attended special schools in the 2019–2020 school year

(Department for Education, 2023) while in Ireland the figure was 9.8% in 2021 (Department of Education and Youth, 2023). Scotland's special school enrolment was slightly lower at 6.8% in 2020, meaning around 93% of students attended mainstream schools (Scottish Government, 2021). Wales reported an even higher inclusion rate with only 5.3% of students in special schools during 2019–2020 (Welsh Government, 2025). In section 1.1.3, I cited Hornby's (2014) observation that Finland has one of the lowest proportions of students educated outside mainstream settings. Research confirms this: approximately 99% of Finnish students attend mainstream schools with only 1% enrolled in special schools, reflecting the country's strong commitment to inclusive education (Statistics Finland, 2020). With this high inclusion rate, Finland arguably provides the closest international comparison to New Zealand in terms of commitment to inclusion, supporting Hornby's claim.

The previous sections have detailed the international movements towards inclusion and how different countries and education systems have responded to inclusion. I have detailed New Zealand's ambitious inclusion stance, alongside the more conservative approaches of Australia, Canada, the United States, and England. Although a brief examination of government statistics is not enough to conclusively claim that New Zealand's educational system is the most inclusive internationally, the data I collected does seem to indicate that New Zealand's enrolment rate in special schools is potentially smaller than many other Western countries. The impacts of "radical" inclusivity on the education system, and SENCOS in particular, are examined and considered throughout the research findings in Chapter Six.

2.3 New Zealand's Inclusion Policy: Reactions and Impacts

New Zealand's approach to international inclusion movements has been described as both ambitious and "radical", sparking considerable discussion in the research literature. This section provides a brief overview of the key debates and perspectives in response to New Zealand's bold policy direction. These debates, I will argue, appear to have significant impact on the work of SENCOS.

The first criticism of mainstreaming/inclusion policy is highlighted in the work of Davison

(2019). Davison contends that, due to the allocation of individual funding, there has been an increased focus on placing students in mainstream schools as a cost-saving measure. As a result, many students with educational needs receive minimal support once in the mainstream. Specifically, Davison (2019) notes that although approximately 3% of New Zealand students are estimated to have severe learning needs, only 1% of these students access ongoing resourcing scheme (ORS) funding, leaving a shortfall of around 2% of students with additional learning needs who receive little to no assistance within mainstream schooling.

A second major criticism of mainstreaming/inclusion policy concerns the move to close special schools in New Zealand. While there has been a strong push toward including all students in mainstream settings, this shift has been accompanied by minimal guidance on how to implement inclusion effectively (NZEI, 2018; Wylie, 2000). Following the “Tomorrow’s Schools” policy (discussed in more detail in the following section), the MOE had “much reduced influence over special education practice” (Hornby, 2014, p. 645). Throughout 1990 - 2019, the MOE had special schools and classes closed and replaced this funding with RTLBs, who work over a range of schools to support students in the mainstream. Recent statistics reveal that there were at least 38 special schools in New Zealand in the early 2000s, but the number had dropped to 28 special schools by 2019 (Education Counts, 2025). The closure of these ten schools suggests that approximately 200 students with a high level of additional learning needs are being catered for in mainstream New Zealand schools (Wylie, 2000). It was difficult to ascertain how many RTLBs had been employed over the same period, and whether all these students who were now in the mainstream were able to access this support and whether this support is adequate. The closure of special schools and the Ministry of Education requirement for mainstream schools to be inclusive has also limited parent choice, resulting in many parents having no other option but to send their children with additional learning needs to the community’s mainstream school (Hornby, 2014). The closure of special schools and the inclusion of these additional students within the mainstream will undoubtedly impact SENCO workload and resourcing. It remains unclear whether the MOE has acknowledged this impact or allocated additional support and resourcing to assist SENCOs in meeting the needs of students who might previously have been educated outside the mainstream.

Another criticism of the mainstreaming/inclusion policy in the literature is that teachers are not adequately prepared to manage inclusion of students with additional learning needs. TALIS 2013 data revealed that 20% of teachers across 25 OECD countries expressed a high need for professional development in inclusive education (OECD, 2014). This indicates that a substantial proportion of teachers felt unprepared to effectively support students with diverse learning needs. Later, TALIS 2018 found that approximately 38% of primary education teachers across OECD countries reported that modifying lessons for students with diverse learning needs was a source of stress in their job (OECD, 2018), suggesting that this challenge remained significant over time. These survey findings highlight a gap between the need for, and the availability of, effective professional development in inclusive education, suggesting that many teachers may not feel adequately prepared to support students with additional learning needs. Other research in England suggests that inclusion is often insufficiently addressed in teacher training, and that resistance to inclusive practices is lower among practitioners who have completed special education qualifications through preservice or in-service programmes (Barton, 2003). Similarly, Zagona et al. (2017) argue that ongoing and targeted teacher training can help reduce teachers' apprehensions about inclusion. Teachers' preparedness for inclusive education is therefore a critical issue, influencing their attitudes, beliefs, and workload within the inclusive education sector. To date, however, there appears to be little research examining New Zealand teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to support students with additional learning needs and inclusive practices.

The most comprehensive government-level review of inclusive education provisions I could find was the Education Review Office's (ERO; 2010) review of inclusion practices. It is important to note that this review is now 13 years old, and I was unable to find evidence of a more recent review. The ERO reviewed 229 schools to evaluate the successful integration of students with additional learning needs. Thirty of these schools were secondary schools. The review focused on the 3% of students within school with the highest needs, which were often the students provided with funding or extra support. ERO considered successful integration to involve successful enrolment, participation, and achievement of special education needs (SEN) students. In 2010, ERO deemed half of the 229 schools to be "mostly

inclusive”, 30% of schools to have “some inclusive practices”, and 20% of schools to have “few inclusive practices”.

Upon review of the half of schools who did demonstrate inclusive practices, ERO (2010) concluded there are two important factors in successful inclusive schools: inclusive leadership and effective teamwork. ERO (2010) concluded that inclusive schools comprise “leadership that built the culture of an inclusive school ... [and] ... effective teamwork and constructive relationships that identified and supported the inclusion of students with high needs” (p. 1). I note that ERO’s onus is on whole-school culture led by management, and a collaborative team approach and relationships to support additional learning needs within the school. The report provided examples of secondary schools, in particular, that would hold regular meetings with a group of personnel (most frequently a member of the leadership team, the SENCO, guidance counsellor, and personnel outside the school, including the RTLB, truancy services, the police, and health professionals). Schools deemed as “successfully inclusive” held these regular meetings with a range of personnel, not just the SENCO working on their own. ERO’s recommendations appear to be that the onus of successful inclusive schools is not on the individual SENCO but the systems, leadership, and relationships to support inclusive culture within the school.

Interestingly, one of the three major recommendations of the ERO (2010) report was to “review how well principal training and support fosters leadership for inclusive schools” (p. 2), suggesting that school leaders need to take responsibility for successful leadership of school-wide integration. As stated in the report, “the key differences between these schools and the most inclusive schools were linked to the ethical approach taken by school leaders and staff” (ERO, 2010, p. 30). ERO concluded that quality of leadership is more influential on a school’s successful inclusion—more so than funding—once again pointing to the importance of school leadership for successful inclusive education practices. However, I was unable to find anything in the literature that makes recommendations for school principals about how best to work with a school’s SENCO, suggesting this is potentially a gap in the New Zealand literature, particularly to support school principals in working successfully with SENCOs.

Following the publication of this ERO (2010) report and the suggestion that only 30% of schools were “mostly inclusive”, the Education Review Office conducted a 2014 follow-up review of 152 schools. ERO (2015) found that there was a significant improvement in the number of inclusive schools, deeming 75% of schools surveyed to be “mostly inclusive”, close to the MOE’s (2010a) target of 80% of New Zealand schools being inclusive. Another finding of ERO’s 2015 report is “a shortage of teacher aide cover (for instance if a teacher aide is ill)” (p. 22), which inevitably also adds to the SENCO’s workload. I was unable to find any evidence of further research or implementation as a result of this finding. Next, I explore the second policy that distinguishes New Zealand’s education system: the “Tomorrow’s Schools” policy.

2.4 “Tomorrow’s Schools”: New Zealand’s Self-Management Schools Policy

New Zealand’s approach to allowing schools to self-manage has, arguably, had a direct impact on the inception and guidelines for the SENCO role. New Zealand SENCOs have a large degree of autonomy and flexibility in their roles as an indirect result of New Zealand’s self-managing school policy. It is therefore necessary to provide some background to the aims and intentions of New Zealand’s self-managing schools policy (Tomorrow’s Schools).

The introduction of the Tomorrow’s Schools reforms marked a rapid and dramatic transformation of New Zealand’s education system, attracting international attention. Holdaway (1989) described New Zealand’s approach as the earthquake method of change compared to reform efforts in England and Australia with virtually all new structures and procedures implemented within one year. These swift reforms not only reshaped school operations but also had implications for students with additional learning needs. The move to self-managing schools increased variability in how support for students with additional learning needs was provided, placing greater responsibility on SENCOs to navigate these differences and advocate for inclusion within each school context (Barker, 2015). The Picot Task Force (1988) laid the groundwork for the Tomorrow’s Schools reforms by recommending the decentralisation of educational administration and the introduction of

self-managing schools governed by Boards of Trustees. The scale and speed of change are reflected in the timeline: only 18 months elapsed from the employment of the Picot Task Force to the creation of a new policy document and the nationwide implementation of the reforms. Urgent policy changes were attributed to holdups in property, staffing, and resources, inequality in Māori achievement, and a lack of community–school interconnections (Wylie, 2000). Wylie (2012) explains that the intention of Tomorrow’s Schools “is that schools are to be left to make their own decisions since this freedom of decision making was assumed to be the key to unlocking the flexibility and responsiveness that would improve educational provision” (p. 85). The reforms were designed to enable schools to respond more quickly and flexibly to their specific property, staffing, and resource needs and to tailor schools to local community requirements, including addressing Māori underachievement.

Although the introduction of Tomorrow’s Schools and self-managing schools may seem like an abrupt and dramatic change for New Zealand’s educational system, it can be argued that New Zealand’s education system has never been overly prescriptive. Before Tomorrow’s Schools, national educational frameworks provided guidelines rather than a tight prescription. Wylie (2012) notes that while syllabuses were available, the implementation of these syllabuses was influenced by the resources available to individual teachers and schools, leading to variability in the materials used and the pace of teaching.

Research, such as Wylie’s (2009), indicates that while there were recommendations and generic subject schedules, the individuality of the teaching material and delivery methods was very much up to the individual school and teacher(s). In secondary schools, while there were regulations around how many hours should be spent on core subjects (English, mathematics, science, and social studies), approximately half of the timetable day was left to the school’s discretion (Wylie, 2012). Tomorrow’s Schools, therefore, seemed to bring a new era of autonomy and self-management to New Zealand’s schools. Wylie (2009) notes that it is interesting that, despite international interest in New Zealand’s self-managing school policy, no other country has emulated this policy. New Zealand’s self-managing school policy grants all state schools a high degree of autonomy and fewer guidelines, within a national framework, distinguishing it from other Western countries where school-

level autonomy is typically limited to charter or selective schools.

The self-managing framework of Tomorrow's Schools has resulted in significant variability in how secondary schools establish, fund, and define the SENCO role, a flexibility that warrants closer examination for its potential benefits and insights. The autonomy given to New Zealand schools under the Tomorrow's Schools policy can be seen in the lack of legislation and guidelines for New Zealand schools regarding the employment of a SENCO. New Zealand secondary schools have made their own decisions over whether or not to appoint a SENCO, the sought-after experience/training of the individual employed for this role, what the roles and responsibilities of the individual will entail, how students with additional learning needs will be supported and resourced, and even the individual's role title (Taylor, 2014). Self-managing schools choose to fund the SENCO role from their bulk funding, and schools decide the hours of employment for this role. It is surprising that, given this flexible context, more research has not been conducted into the potential advantages of this flexibility and the variations of this role across New Zealand (Kearney et al., 2017). I argue that by exploring the many variations of this role enacted across New Zealand, there can be important learning for New Zealand educators worldwide.

The next section of this literature review offers a deeper exploration of the context surrounding inclusive education in New Zealand. Drawing on relevant literature, it examines how additional learning needs are defined and how resourcing decisions are determined within the New Zealand education system.

2.5 Creation of the SENCO Role in New Zealand

The adoption of the SENCO position in a New Zealand context is largely due to the work of Dr Cathy Wylie. In July 2000, a New Zealand report, *Picking up the Pieces*, was published by the New Zealand Centre for Educational Research (NZCER) and produced by Dr Cathy Wylie. This report compared the ideals of the Special Education 2000 Policy with the actuality of the practice. The NZCER and Dr Wylie examined the equity of inclusive education across a range of schools, focusing on resourcing and provisions for students with additional learning needs. The study was an extensive consultation with schools, parents, and other education

providers, and the academic outcomes of these students were also assessed. Wylie recommended that every school receive a 0.2 or 0.4 full-time equivalent teacher in a SENCO role. The position should be to develop the staff's ability, manage the special education grant (SEG), and coordinate personnel services. Wylie recommended that the school set up clear policies, procedures, roles, and responsibilities, including a job description for SENCOs. The emphasis here is on the school's responsibility rather than government-level management. While Wylie (2000) provided suggested areas of responsibility for this role, the report stated that individual self-managing schools need to have discretion over the functioning and practicalities of this role.

Based on the findings of Wylie's (2000) report, the Ministry of Education (2010a) identified a need for a specialised person to oversee the education of students with additional learning needs. The New Zealand MOE established the position of Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in the year 2000 (Fraser et al., 2005). This was followed by the Special Education 2000 Policy, which outlined resourcing for students with diverse educational needs (MOE, 2013a). In this policy document, the MOE set out to have inclusivity for all (no segregation of students with additional learning needs) by 2014. This perhaps signals the ambition of New Zealand's "radical" inclusive policy as identified by Hornby (2011, 2014). Aspects of New Zealand's policies included the Intensive Wraparound Service (IWS) to support students previously enrolled in special schools and support their integration into mainstream schooling (MOE, 2013b).

However, there are significant differences regarding New Zealand's approach to the SENCO position. While New Zealand schools were recommended to employ an individual for the SENCO role in the Wylie (2000) report, there were no requirements to do so. In New Zealand in 2025—thirty years after England introduced national standards for SENCOs—there remains no formal requirement for SENCOs to hold specialist qualifications or undertake specific training for the role (Hornby, 2014; Kearney et al., 2017). There is also no required training to be a SENCO in a New Zealand context and no suggested guidelines about contracted hours, role description, or guidance about how to do the role in practice (Taylor, 2014). Not only are there no guidelines for SENCOs but there are no guidelines for school leaders either, suggesting that there is a missing level of guidance here (Kearney et

al., 2017). These differences are explored in more detail, using available literature, in Chapter Three.

To summarise, the development and regulation of the SENCO role have taken very different paths in England and New Zealand, reflecting contrasting approaches to national policy. England introduced the SENCO role in 1983, and New Zealand followed almost 20 years later in the year 2000. In England, there are national standards for SENCOs and a Code of Practice, providing nationwide guidelines and regulations for the SENCO role. In comparison, the introduction of the SENCO role in New Zealand was first proposed in the *Wylie Report* (Wylie, 2000) and is recognised in subsequent research as the foundation for the role's development in New Zealand schools (Kearney et al., 2017). While the MOE communicated the suggestion for all schools to employ a SENCO, there are currently no national qualifications or training required to be a SENCO. There is also no national job description (or Code of Practice) as each individual school is given the autonomy to cater this SENCO role to the needs of their school. One of the main reasons for this difference in the functioning of the SENCO roles is due to New Zealand's self-managing schools' policy—a policy not seen in any other country or education system.

2.6 Contemporary Issues in New Zealand Secondary Schools

New Zealand secondary schools are encountering growing cultural diversity and a widening range of individual learning needs. Statistics released by educational researchers suggest that by 2023, there will be an increase of 9% of students with additional learning needs (Department for Education, 2023). Added to this, between 1990 to the present, the number of special schools in New Zealand has almost halved (Davison, 2019). As explained in Section 2.4, the onus is therefore on schools to cater for students with all educational needs within mainstream schools.

Classrooms across New Zealand are experiencing growing ethnic diversity, reflected in a notable rise in students for whom English is not their first language (ERO, 2018). In Auckland alone, the ERO found more than 100 ethnicities represented in schools, with over 150 languages spoken. Nationally, the proportion of New Zealand European students decreased

from 55.9% in 2009 to 50.3% in 2017, and as of 2025, represents less than half of the school population (ERO, 2018; 2023). During the same period, the number of Māori, Pasifika, and Asian students has increased, with Asian students rising from 9.1% in 2009 to 11.8% in 2017, and Māori students comprising 24% of students in 2018 (ERO, 2018). The ERO anticipates that by 2043, one in four students will be New Zealand immigrants, with almost forty percent of students in Auckland schools coming from Asian communities (ERO, 2023). As English as a Second Language (ESL) support falls within SENCO responsibilities (MOE, 2024b), this growing linguistic and cultural diversity is likely to affect the time and workload required for supporting students.

Research literature highlights a noticeable trend of rising behavioural and additional learning needs within schools in New Zealand and internationally (Carpenter, 2010; Symes, 2014). Carpenter (2010) has argued that schools are increasingly required to provide inclusive education support with more students needing such provisions than ever before. Focusing specifically on the SENCO role in New Zealand, Symes (2014) notes that “based on research from New Zealand, England, and the USA, it is likely that there could be an increasing number of students with special needs enrolling in New Zealand schools” (p. ii). Syme’s findings indicate that the demand for inclusive education support is growing globally. While this study does not examine the underlying causes of the reported increase in additional learning needs across different countries, it is important to recognise the escalating pressures on the inclusive education sector. Both in New Zealand and abroad, education systems are experiencing a rise in the identification of diverse learning needs with significant consequences for resourcing, delivery, and planning.

In New Zealand, there has been a notable shift in how behavioural challenges are conceptualised in educational settings. Rather than being seen as simply “naughty” behaviour, such actions are increasingly recognised as stemming from unmet learning needs (ERO, 2022). Likewise, the MOE (2023) emphasises supporting students to develop positive behaviours and social skills, viewing behavioural challenges as opportunities for growth rather than misconduct. As a result, students exhibiting challenging behaviours are now considered alongside those with additional learning needs, thereby expanding the responsibilities of school SENCOs.

2.7 Issues of Inclusive Education Resourcing

Research in the New Zealand context has frequently highlighted concerns about the adequacy of inclusive education funding, resourcing, and provision. Research and reports consistently challenge the Ministry of Education's assumption that current levels of funding are sufficient to meet the needs of all students requiring additional support. Concerns have been raised that the Tomorrow's Schools reforms led to fragmentation and inequities between schools with some institutions better able than others to resource specialist support (Fancy, 2009). More recently, national surveys and independent investigations have reinforced these criticisms. In the NZEI's (2018) survey of over 500 teachers, 91% reported that students were not receiving the necessary support or funding, and only 28% agreed that timely access to support was possible, indicating widespread delays in meeting student needs. The ERO (2022) similarly found that disabled learners were often discouraged from enrolling or were asked to stay home, and that schools and teachers lacked clarity and confidence in providing adequate support. McColloch (2022) describes the system as broken, highlighting that the proportion of students gaining access to ORS funding has declined over recent years, despite increasing enrolments and demand. Parallel findings from Aiono (2025) reveal that ineffective funding structures and barriers to resources exacerbate inequities and limit effective provision. Collectively, these studies illustrate how inconsistent policy implementation, underresourcing, and schools acting as silos undermine the goal of equitable inclusive education provision across New Zealand.

Furthering these criticisms, New Zealand researchers (Hamilton, 2016; NZEI, 2018) have argued that funding shortfalls often result in parents and whānau (family) being expected to cover costs themselves. In the NZEI (2018) survey, it was found that 22% of funding comes from parents, who are independently funding their children's needs for support (for example, paying privately for a teacher aide) due to a perception that the school's funding was not adequate in supporting their child's needs. Hamilton (2016) has also argued the cost to parents whose children have additional learning needs. After interviewing and surveying 141 families with children with diverse learning needs, she found there was a significant financial burden placed on families who are personally financially topping up

inadequate levels of government funding. There is also evidence in the research literature that families are sometimes asked to keep their children at home due to a lack of resourcing or supports in place. This has a considerable impact on the parents' ability to maintain employment (Hamilton, 2016; McColloch, 2022). Parents have to fight for their access to funding/support within fragmented schools (Fancy, 2009), which often has a financial burden on families who are expected to contribute to costs due to an inadequate funding system (Hamilton, 2016). Concerns also raised regarding the financial impact on families who are in poverty or who cannot afford to supplement support, or take time out of paid employment to support their children at home (Hamilton, 2016).

2.7.1 Government Reviews of Inclusive Education Provisions

Given the criticisms in the literature, I was interested to see whether there had been government-level acknowledgement or review of funding and provisions. Research literature indicates that the New Zealand Government has undertaken some reviews of inclusive education provisions and funding adequacy, resulting in a limited number of targeted responses; however, significant areas for improvement remain. In 2016, the New Zealand Government undertook a Select Committee Inquiry into inclusive education in New Zealand schools. This Inquiry surveyed parents and teachers to ascertain the quality of inclusive education being provided from the point of view of families and teachers. The Inquiry sought feedback from its most important stakeholders—communities and families. Two thousand submissions—written as well as oral—were made from groups and individuals across the country. This is an impressive response, resulting in a document that lists 214 pages of feedback from stakeholders right across New Zealand. When asked about the single most important change New Zealand could make to its inclusive education resourcing, 30 per cent of respondents stated that funding needed to be increased, particularly in mainstream schools (Education and Science Committee, 2016). Following the Select Committee Inquiry, the MOE announced funding changes to the inclusive education sector. Announced on August 11th 2019, the Ministry promised a \$217 million funding package for inclusive education (MOE, 2019b). The funding was allocated over four years to support the rollout of 600 learning support coordinators across both primary and secondary schools.

Although I was unable to find SENCO-specific reviews from the MOE, an ERO review of resource teachers of learning and behaviour (RTLBs) in 2004 in New Zealand schools contains interesting findings regarding inclusive education provisions and suggested changes. This RTLB review aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of RTLBs currently working across New Zealand schools. The ERO (2006) found serious flaws in the RTLB sector, citing issues with funding, management, accountability, and timeliness of provisions. In response to this ERO 2006 review, the MOE (2007) created national coordinator positions and policy documents, including the “Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) Policy and Toolkit”. ERO conducted another review in 2009 to establish whether any improvement had been made since the 2004 review. It was concerning to see that ERO, by 2009, reported little to no change since the last review and recommendations:

Despite increased guidance and support from the Ministry of Education, the wide variability and governance and management practice ERO reported in 2004 remains evident. A lack of strong external and internal accountabilities for the use of funding and management of RTLB remains an issue in a large proportion of clusters. ERO found that just under half (18) of the 40 clusters were well-governed and managed. (ERO, 2009, p. 1)

There are two relevant concerns in this statement and the findings of this report. One is the lack of defined roles and responsibilities, which appear to be causing problems in the RTLB service. The second is that concerns were raised about the inclusive education sector in the 2004 and 2009 reviews, yet I could find no significant signs of change or increased governance to support the provisioning of RTLBs. ERO (2009) commented, “The variability found in governance, management and delivery of the RTLB service nationally indicates a need for review of the model to ensure a more cohesive and consistent approach” (p. 44). The more “cohesive and consistent” approach calls for nationwide regulated training, job descriptions, and appraisal of RTLBS, which is in contrast with the self-managing RTLB system currently seen across schools. Interestingly, the MOE (2102) responded to this notice of poor management by implementing policy and “toolkits”, outlining roles and expectations rather than implementing specific guidelines. This appeared to be a response

of support rather than funding. These toolkits included suggested assessment/testing schemes, administration and tracking guidelines, and suggested role responsibilities. Although not formally regulated, these toolkits provide RTLBs with greater resourcing and documentation support while still allowing flexibility, creating a balance between autonomy and guidance, unlike the SENCO role, which operates with almost no regulation.

In 2016, a submission was presented to the New Zealand Government calling for better funding and support of the SENCO role. The Education and Science Committee (2016) presented the New Zealand Government with written submissions from 445 organisations and individuals concerned that support and expertise varied widely between schools and that the capability of SENCO and inclusive education staff also differed. Recommendations included investigating the feasibility of: establishing recognised qualifications for SENCOs, finding full-time trained SENCOs for schools with more than 200 students, and offering support packages for SENCOs. As stated in the report, “submitters also noted that the SENCO role was often an additional role done by a busy senior staff member as part of their work and felt that these staff did not have adequate time or training to fulfil this role” (New Zealand Parliament, 2016, p. 46). I was unable to find any follow-up to this submission or any subsequent actions based on these requests.

Over the next two years, the NZEI (2018) conducted a similar campaign, advocating for a fully funded, designated SENCO role in each school. The campaign also encouraged formal recognition and resourcing of the SENCO role. As with the preceding 2016 submission, I could not find any response from the government or changes to the SENCO role in response to this campaign.

In reaction to identified issues of funding and support in the inclusive education sector, there are proposed changes by the MOE, including more dedicated inclusive education funding and new specialised roles. It was very timely that during the five years of conducting this research, these changes were rolled out, resulting in my research somewhat reflecting some of the impact of these changes. The next section details these changes proposed by

the MOE and explores the literature to consider the impact they may have on the current SENCO position.

2.7.2 Timing of this Research and Changes to the Inclusive Education Sector

While undertaking this research, inclusive education came under major review by the New Zealand Government and the Ministry of Education (2010b; 2010c; 2013b; 2019b; 2024a). From my review of MOE documents and policy, this appears to be the first attempt by the New Zealand Government and the MOE to centralise inclusive educational support. The two largest proposed changes for New Zealand secondary schools will be a specific job description for a learning support coordinator and funding for a centralised special educational needs register. Until 2019, the role of the SENCO and the identification and monitoring of students with additional learning needs has been at the school's discretion under the self-managing schools' policy.

A part of these changes, a new model for inclusive education services in New Zealand has been created—the Learning Support Delivery Model (LSDM)—with the aim to improve the quality of New Zealand's inclusive education provisions. The new model is based on best practice overseas as well as other New Zealand models “that highlight the value of flexibility and responsiveness to the local community” (MOE, 2019a, para. 2). It is unclear from the literature which “best practice overseas” the MOE had used in the formation of this new model. Introducing a new position of learning support coordinators (LSCs) is the priority in a seven-step “Learning Support Action Plan 2019–2025” (MOE, 2019b), a plan which has been created to carry out the priorities of the LSDM. The fact that learning support coordinators are the very first priority suggests some recognition on behalf of the MOE/government that this coordinator position is the most important factor in addressing inclusive educational improvements and that further staffing is a key resource need in addition to provisions that already exist to meet additional learning needs.

According to the MOE (2019a), the purpose of the learning support coordinator position is as follows:

LSCs are an in-school role that will work to ensure all learners – including those with disabilities, neurodiversity, behavioural issues and who are gifted – get the help they need. The LSC is an additional, full-time, dedicated role, not an add-on to existing classroom teaching or management responsibilities. They may work across several smaller schools. (para. 1)

This quote shows the recognition by the MOE for the need for an additional position for inclusive education resourcing on top of staffing and provisions that already exist. The New Zealand Government (2019) offers the following explanation of how the LSC and SENCO could coexist in a school, working alongside each other:

LSCs will also work with Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) as part of a school or kura team where SENCO roles are retained ... Schools can retain their SENCO if they choose to, in addition to having an LSC, as the SENCO role has been established by the school board of trustees. LSCs will have responsibility for the school's learning support register, which will free up time for the SENCO, where schools continue with that role. (New Zealand Government, 2019, para. 7)

The Learning Support Action Plan 2019–2025 proposal would mean approximately one LSC position for every 500 students. The MOE admits that while SENCOs exist in most New Zealand schools, this is not a formal, regulated arrangement but individualised and at the control of the local school, explaining that “some schools and kura choose to use their own resources to fund SENCOs” (New Zealand Government, 2019, para. 4), emphasising the fact that SENCOs are still an optional funding decision, not a formally funded role. The future of SENCOs in New Zealand schools under this new learning support model is very unclear. The establishment of LSCs will likely directly impact the role and functioning of a SENCO.

In seeking to understand the implications of the new Learning Support Delivery Model and the introduction of the LSC role for the future of the SENCO position, I contacted the MOE for comment. I was privileged to speak with Tracey Martin, Associate Minister of Education (personal communication, August 30, 2020). Tracey Martin had been pivotal in establishing and rolling out the LSC roles. Within our meeting, I specifically asked Martin about the

potential challenge of a school employing both a SENCO and LSC now that this new role had been developed. Martin did confirm that schools have complete control over whether to employ SENCOs but said she had pleaded with schools to keep the SENCO role. She believes the SENCO should be a highly experienced staff member or a senior leadership team member in the school as the mentor for the LSC. Martin repeatedly reiterated the SENCO role's importance, confirming that it was vital for schools to continue funding this position from their own budget, stating that SENCO job security is dependent on the school. She believed there was no reason for schools to cut funding or management units for SENCOs. In a keynote speech, Martin was quoted as saying "I better clarify quickly that you [LSCs] are not to replace SENCOs. You are an addition. You are extra. You are more ... My question is how much more will we be able to do for our children if you're both there?" (New Zealand Government, 2019, para 5). Martin's quote makes it very clear that LSCs are an addition to the SENCO role, not a replacement.

It is important to note that Martin acknowledged that the SENCO's role may need to be altered now that the position is working alongside the new LSC position (New Zealand Government, 2019). She made it clear that these roles were aligned beside each other and not as a hierarchy with one role on top of another. Martin suggested that SENCOs and RTLBs alter their roles/responsibilities to work alongside the new LSC position but also questioned how SENCOs and RTLBs could alter their jobs to work alongside the LSC. Martin believed decisions would need to be made within schools around how SENCO roles adapt. Therefore, She suggested that schools still need to employ a SENCO, but this role would need to adapt to best fit the new LSC position.

Given the timing of the introduction of the new role, it is particularly important for policymakers and school leaders to gain a clear understanding of the current functioning of the SENCO role and the potential implications of the LSC role on it. A more comprehensive understanding of the SENCO role will support more informed and effective implementation of the new learning support coordinator positions. Having outlined the contemporary context for New Zealand SENCOs, I now turn to one of the key theoretical lenses for this study: relational agency.

2.8 Introducing Relational Agency as a Theoretical Lens

Selecting a conceptual lens through which to focus this research has been an important consideration. Due to my experience in the education sector, I was aware of the highly relational nature of education. Before embarking on this research study, I had observed SENCOs' daily interactions with a number of people to fulfil all aspects of their role, which led me to assume that SENCOs are highly relational and interactive in their professional practice. The literature review highlighted a small amount of research that acknowledged the seemingly strong reliance on relationships within the SENCO role, including Lin (2020), who had observed the relational nature of SENCO work and argued that this is an area lacking in New Zealand's research. I was also interested in the benefits of effective relationships as my observations suggested that SENCOs who built strong collaborative partnerships were better able to share responsibility for supporting students with additional learning needs alongside colleagues and other professionals. After contemplation and consideration of theoretical frameworks, I have been drawn to the concept of relational agency, as championed by the work of Anne Edwards (2005, 2010, 2011, 2012). While frameworks such as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), and activity theory (Engeström, 1987) provide useful insights into collaboration, they do not fully capture the relational and responsive coordination required of SENCOs. Relational Agency (Edwards, 2005) was therefore selected, as it explicitly highlights how practitioners align their expertise and work relationally across professional and organisational boundaries to support students with additional needs. I was interested in relational agency in the SENCO role—how professional relationships are used to make sense of the SENCO position and gain the expertise/knowledge required to fulfil that role.

Relational agency is a relatively recent concept. Relational agency was first defined by Edwards (2005) as “a capacity to align one's thoughts and actions with those of others to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations” (p. 169).

Underpinning this theory is the recognition that no one professional holds all the answers. Educators work with others' expertise, acknowledging that everyone holds different knowledge. Relational agency recognises and utilises the contributions of others

(Edwards, 2005, 2010) and refers to the capacity to work with others to expand the resources one can draw upon to provide solutions (Edwards, 2010).

Twelve years later, Edwards (2017) altered this 2005 definition, seemingly removing the suggestion that these relationships are always associated with a “problem”. The definition was later extended to include collaboration, mostly across practice boundaries, to reveal and respond to complexity (Edwards, 2017). The 2017 definition emphasises the cross-practice relationships by defining relational agency as “a capacity for working with others, across practice boundaries, to strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems” (p. 31). In other words, relational agency recognises how practitioners can combine their own expertise with others to work across practice boundaries in collaborative, shared, and purposeful action. The shared action also implies a collective responsibility and shared investment in achieving goals. Edwards' updated definition stated relational agency is a “capacity to engage with the dispositions of others to interpret and act on the objects of our actions in an extended way” (p. 212). The emphasis on “extended” indicates that these relationships develop over a sustained period, allowing for greater depth of understanding and stronger connections to achieve shared goals. It may also refer to the need for multiple, diverse relationships across different areas of expertise—with “extended” encompassing both the breadth and diversity of these interactions—enabling them to function in richer and more varied ways.

Agency occurs when “those who come together have identified what matters to them as a group with diverse expertise, viewpoints and practices” (Duhn et al., 2016, p. 382). Central to this concept is a collective understanding of what “matters” (Duhn et al., 2016), which captures the essence of agency. In the context of inclusive education, this can be understood as a collaborative approach where responsibility and decision making are shared across the school rather than resting on a single individual. Accordingly, in my research, I conceptualise relational agency as professionals working together, contributing their individual expertise to address the needs of students with additional learning needs.

Edwards wanted to go beyond a purely dialogic sense of relationship to create a concept that looked at the more holistic benefit of relationships within education and highlighting

the personal values that individuals bring to their roles and these professional relationships. Edwards (2017) acknowledges this personal value by stating:

... people are not merely products of the practices they find themselves in; they are agentic and have commitments Enacting expertise is therefore very tightly connected with what matters to people in the actions they take in the practices they inhabit. (p. 4)

Agency, therefore, acknowledges the personal values SENCOS attach to their role.

Relational agency acknowledges that these relationships are context specific, and each SENCO may experience very different relationships within their specific setting. Focusing on this concept allows me to highlight the types and frequency of these relationships, from where SENCOS draw expertise, and the nature of any collaborations to ensure positive outcomes to any issues, and how the people in this role negotiate, collaborate, and act.

This theory is particularly pertinent to the role of SENCOS as they broker relationships between staff, students, families, and external agencies. From my observations prior to this research, SENCOS are required to translate knowledge across different professional worlds and need to support systematic change by drawing on collective expertise rather than working in isolation (Fitzgerald, 2017).

2.8.1 Relational Theory in a New Zealand Context

Connecting relational agency to a New Zealand context, I was drawn to the work of Bishop (2003, 2006, 2009, 2019), whose relational theories are celebrated in the New Zealand educational system. This connection provides a foundation for understanding how relational theory, as articulated by Bishop, informs SENCO practice and relational agency in New Zealand schools. It was also important to draw on the work of educational theorists, such as Bishop and Berryman, whose relational theories of education underpin the practices of many New Zealand schools (Bishop, 2003, 2019; Bishop & Berryman, 2006, 2009). Bishop's relational theory emphasises the central role of relationships in educational success, arguing that effective learning, particularly for marginalised groups, is not just about curriculum or

pedagogy but about the quality of relationships between teachers and students, and among the wider school community (Bishop, 2003, 2019). Connecting to the interagency of relational agency, Bishop and Berryman's (2006, 2009) theories stress the importance of involving whānau (families) and communities as partners in education rather than viewing schooling as a solely institutional responsibility.

Bishop's relational theory provides a valuable lens for understanding the role of SENCOs in New Zealand schools, particularly in terms of relational agency. The theory emphasises that meaningful relationships based on trust, respect, and collaboration are central to fostering student engagement and learning, especially for students with additional needs. For SENCOs, this highlights the importance of building strong, culturally responsive relationships with students, whānau, and teaching colleagues to support inclusive practices. Bishop (2003) champions that building strong relationships, not only with students but with whānau, is crucial to educational success. Relational agency, as enacted by SENCOs, involves leveraging these relationships to navigate constraints, coordinate support, and influence educational decisions, ensuring that the needs of diverse learners are effectively met. By foregrounding relational trust and collaboration, Bishop's framework aligns closely with the ways SENCOs enact agency to improve student outcomes in the New Zealand context.

The theory of relational agency and its connection to the similar research in a New Zealand context of Bishop and Berryman (2006, 2009) led me to wondering about the recognition of relational agency in a SENCO role. I began to question how SENCOs are enabled to enact this agency and the constraints and enablers to this agency in the SENCO role. I was also interested in what outcomes could be achieved with successful and collaborative agency, and what these outcomes may look like. Given the recognised importance of relationships and agency in the practical functioning of the SENCO role, relational agency provides the theoretical lens for research question three (how do SENCOs engage relational agency to support their work within secondary schools?)

2.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter has examined major developments in inclusive education policy at the international level, comparing global approaches to inclusion, resource allocation, and the establishment of the SENCO role as a key mechanism for support. It also introduced New Zealand's distinctive approach, characterised by its ambitious inclusion policy and the self-managing framework of the "Tomorrow's Schools" reform to illustrate the unique features of the country's inclusive education sector.

Following this, the contemporary context of New Zealand's classrooms was examined, highlighting the increasing diversity and rise in diverse learning needs. There is evidence in the literature that our inclusive education system is not functioning effectively under this increased pressure with criticisms of funding levels, provisions, and a financial impact on families. Somewhat in response to criticisms and pressure, the MOE has undertaken an overhaul of the system worth \$217 million. The introduction of the Learning Support Delivery Model and the LSCs will directly impact SENCOs (the position and nature of the work) in New Zealand secondary schools. As the inclusive education sector undergoes changes in provisioning and resourcing, I question the extent to which current provisions, particularly the work of SENCOs, have been fully understood and acknowledged before further changes are implemented.

While this chapter has outlined the policy context and background informing the study, the second chapter of this literature review shifts focus to the SENCO role within the research literature with particular emphasis on the New Zealand context. Drawing on current studies, it explores what is known about the characteristics, perceptions, experiences, and relational agency of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools.

Chapter Three: SENCOs in the Research Literature: What do we know and where are the gaps?

Being a SENCO is like being on a deserted island. I know what I do, but I wouldn't have a clue what other SENCOs do. Do they have the same problems as me? Do they go home exhausted like me? Am I even doing this job the way it's supposed to be done? I wouldn't have a clue—because I try to find out what other SENCOs are doing, and there's nothing out there! It's like I'm on a desert island trying to work out how the heck to do this job on my own.

—Jane, case study participant, March 2021

Jane's quote in the epigraph highlights the need for this literature review—there appears to be limited research literature documenting the SENCO role in a New Zealand context and how the SENCO role functions in a New Zealand secondary school. SENCOs such as Jane express feelings of isolation due to the small amount of published (or available) research documenting the role. This chapter addresses this gap in knowledge by highlighting the research that we already have to build a picture of what is known about the SENCO role in New Zealand and identify the gaps in the literature requiring further research.

While there is evidence of research in a New Zealand primary school context, the literature relating to SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools was difficult to find. Therefore, I turned to international research, particularly by examining literature in England, where there is prolific research literature detailing the SENCO role. I used the international research as a broad knowledge base before moving to the New Zealand-based research. In this chapter, I highlight key research studies in New Zealand, covering the lack of formalisation of New Zealand SENCOs (Section 3.1), what is known about in the research literature about SENCOs (Section 3.2), themes and debates in the research literature (Section 3.3), leadership (Section 3.4), and SENCO experiences in the literature (Section 3.5). Lastly, after identifying the gaps in the research literature, I refine the plan for my research study and research questions (see Section 3.6).

3.1 New Zealand SENCOs are “Pivotal” Despite Formalisation or Recognition

Despite the lack of legislation and guidelines, SENCOs have become commonplace in New Zealand schools and are even praised for the critical role they play (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2014). This section explores this apparent dichotomy: the perceived importance of the New Zealand SENCO role despite the lack of regulations, guidelines, and recognition in government records.

In New Zealand, schools currently have complete autonomy and discretion over whether or not to appoint a SENCO (Harrington, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2010). This is in contrast to many international countries where the SENCO role (or equivalent) is legislated and regulated (Bell, 1999; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Smith, 2022a; Tissot, 2013). New Zealand's unique SENCO context, specifically the lack of legislation, is highlighted in the following quotation from Kearney et al. (2007):

The importance of the Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in facilitating inclusive and equitable education is well supported in the literature, with many countries formalising the role through legislation and policy. New Zealand, however, while adopting the role of SENCO, has not formalised this role, meaning that those in SENCO positions in New Zealand experience high levels of flexibility and autonomy. (p. 114)

The quote from Kearney et al. (2017) highlights the unique context for New Zealand SENCOs. As will be shown throughout this literature review, this has come to mean that schools have full discretion over the appointment of a SENCO and what this role looks like based on individual school contexts.

Despite the complete autonomy offered to New Zealand schools regarding whether to appoint a SENCO, the literature suggests that SENCOs have become a common and important resourcing decision by New Zealand schools. The main source of information on SENCO work in New Zealand is the New Zealand Education Review Office (ERO) reports. The ERO is established to appraise and critique the successful running of schools by regular visits

to all New Zealand schools and publishing reports on their public website. The ERO (2010) described the SENCO position as critical for ensuring that students with high needs have the learning programmes and support they need to achieve at school” (p. 13). The ERO consistently commends the role of SENCOs for contributing to the development of inclusive schools (ERO, 2010, 2012b, 2015). Statistics provided in these reports include a 2012 survey of 254 schools throughout New Zealand that found that 80% of schools (primary and secondary) had a dedicated SENCO (ERO, 2012b). ERO’s (2015) report stated that schools identified as “mostly inclusive” had an experienced and “appropriately trained” SENCO; however, there was no detail on what ERO considered “experienced” or “appropriately trained”. In 2022, the ERO carried out a review of effective inclusive practices in New Zealand schools, identifying the SENCO role as a key component of successful inclusion. ERO further emphasised that SENCOs play a regular and important role within New Zealand schools. The MOE (2022) has also documented praise for the SENCO role and its importance in New Zealand schools. However, I was unable to locate any Ministry-level literature or research that clearly outlines the responsibilities of a SENCO or defines the role, highlighting a paradox: the SENCO role is frequently praised yet remains poorly understood. Taylor (2014) states that “New Zealand schools have moved towards the establishment of SENCO positions despite the lack of [Ministry] recognition of the position” (p. 6), suggesting that SENCOs are common in New Zealand schools. Taylor’s views are also echoed by Kearney et al. (2017), who commented that the lack of recognition of the SENCO role is “puzzling” (p. 125), especially given New Zealand’s strong stance towards equitable education systems.

The absence of legislation has also resulted in a lack of targeted funding, guidelines, or formal training for New Zealand SENCOs. Identifying a lack of knowledge around SENCOs in New Zealand schools, Kearney et al. (2017) examined how the SENCO role has manifested itself in schools. The authors conducted a qualitative and quantitative online questionnaire of 75 SENCOs in primary and secondary schools across New Zealand. Despite being a key part of the provision of inclusive education, Kearney et al. (2017) identified that the MOE did not yet support the SENCO role, the role is not standardised, and SENCOs are not formally trained. The New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI; 2018), after surveying 570 SENCOs across New Zealand, also commented on the confusion regarding formal recognition. It states: “despite policy discourses about SENCOs being key to New Zealand’s

inclusive education system, the SENCO role is not formally recognised or directly funded by the Ministry of Education” (NZEI, 2018, p. 6). The views of these researchers suggest that although SENCO positions are commonplace throughout New Zealand schools, little is known about how SENCOs gain the knowledge and skills needed to perform their role. Both pieces of research concluded that individual schools make decisions about funding and the responsibilities of a SENCO’s work rather than being led by government-level legislation or guidelines.

There is a lack of requirement for individuals in New Zealand SENCO positions to hold a formal or regulated qualification. To provide an international contrast to this unique context, in England, the *SENCO Code of Practice (2015)* stipulates that the SENCO must be a qualified teacher (Department for Education, 2015). After 2009, all SENCOs in England had to complete the “National Award for SEN Co-ordination” within three years of taking a position as a SENCO. This qualification covers additional learning needs with a focus on the expectations of the SENCO role (Cheminais, 2015). In 2024, England’s National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination was replaced by the National Professional Qualification for SENCOs (NPQ for SENCOs) (Department for Education, 2025). This new qualification is now the mandatory leadership-level programme for all new SENCOs, designed to develop the knowledge, skills, and behaviours required for effective SEND leadership (Department for Education, 2025). In comparison, there are no required qualifications or training for SENCOs in New Zealand; therefore, employment of SENCOs, and the level of experience and qualifications these individuals hold, is at the discretion of individual schools (Kearney et al., 2017; NZEI, 2018; Taylor, 2014). Despite periods of time in the education sector, it is surprising to learn how few New Zealand SENCOs hold formal training and qualifications in inclusive education. Storer (2002) surveyed primary school SENCOs in Canterbury, New Zealand, and found that only 35% of these participants had formal training, professional development, or special education qualifications. The shortcomings of this study were that there was no similar survey of SENCOs in secondary schools. Similarly, the survey results from Kearney et al. (2017), who surveyed 75 SENCOs working in New Zealand schools, found that just over half, 52% of respondents, reported that they had no training for their role, and 20% reported receiving very little training. Of those who had received training for their role, the only person who provided this training

was the previous SENCO (Kearney et al., 2017). Unfortunately, only 22%, or 16 of these respondents, worked in secondary schools, so more research is needed to investigate the demographics and training/qualifications for secondary school SENCOs. Within my own research study, I was prompted—given the lack of regulated experience and qualifications—to find out about the previous experience and formal qualifications of the individuals filling these SENCO roles and participants' views about necessary training or qualifications to fulfil the role.

3.2 What is Known in the Research Literature about SENCOs

This section uses international and New Zealand literature to critique what it tells about the SENCO role, including demographics of the individuals in these roles, the role and workload, support and resourcing, and the importance of relationships.

3.2.1 SENCO Characteristics and Demographics

Learning that there was no government information held about SENCOs in New Zealand, I turned to the closest comparison—SENCOs in England. Interestingly, I learned that despite the legislation and regulations surrounding the SENCO role in England, similarly to New Zealand, the English Government does not hold any demographic information for SENCOs (Rosen-Webb, 2011; Tissot, 2013). However, one researcher (Dobson, 2019) identified this gap in demographic information regarding SENCOs held by the government and sent a “Freedom of Information” request to the Department for Education for this information. After receiving and analysing SENCO demographic data as held by the Government, Dobson (2019) concluded that SENCOs are primarily female (90%), of white British origin, trained teachers, and in the middle to end of their teaching careers. Dobson (2019) summarises his demographic analysis by concluding, “most are on the class teacher pay scale rather than being on the leadership scale, with a minority holding a Master’s level qualification” (p. 445). Dobson (2019) suggests that the gender split for SENCOs is even more surprising with approximately 75.9% of teachers in England being female, while a higher proportion, 90.6% are female SENCOs. The majority (77%) of SENCOs hold their position full time while only 23% are part-time SENCOs. Almost two thirds are aged over 40 (62.8%) with 28% aged over 50, suggesting that a quarter of SENCOs in England are nearing

retirement age. Summarising this demographic data, it can be concluded that SENCOs in England are primarily female, mature (aged over 40), and work full time in their SENCO roles.

Turning now to New Zealand demographic information: the small amount of research that we do have regarding SENCOs in New Zealand schools (covering both primary and secondary schools) highlights that the educators filling the SENCO roles in our New Zealand schools are experienced teachers. New Zealand researchers have found that New Zealand SENCOs are primarily female (Kearney et al., 2017), and more than 86% of New Zealand SENCOs have ten or more years of experience in teaching and/or other education roles (Collinson, 2011; Storer, 2002). In addition, SENCOs in New Zealand are often senior leaders: 46% hold senior management positions and 16% are principals (Collinson, 2011). New Zealand SENCOs have also been found to be experienced managers with 81% of SENCOs responsible for managing teacher aides and 79% of SENCOs responsible for special educational needs' budgets (Collinson, 2011). This data suggests a level of skill, knowledge, and educational experience required to fulfil this SENCO role successfully. These studies did not include any specific data for the SENCO participants in secondary schools. Given the fact that the research literature suggests there is a level of maturity and experience needed to fill this position, prior experience of individuals became a question to be developed within the survey and case studies in this research.

Although research data suggests that New Zealand SENCOs are experienced educators, two New Zealand surveys have indicated that most SENCOs have not been in their roles long, suggesting a high turnover in the role. The NZEI conducted two surveys: a survey of 352 SENCOs in 2016 and a follow-up survey of 572 SENCOs in 2018. One of the major findings of both surveys was a high turnover of staff in the role with more than half of respondents—58%—having been in the role less than five years. The NZEI (2018) suggests this statistic was not surprising, “given the lack of compensation and lack of release time” (p. 11). Considering suggestions made about high turnover in the SENCO role, within my own survey and case study research, it would be important to question the length of time in the role and some indication of longevity in the role.

Although I have used the term “SENCO” for the purposes of this study, the SENCO title may not be the most appropriate role title. Within their two surveys, canvassing over 500 SENCOs, the NZEI (2018) concluded that most SENCOs do not believe the SENCO label is the most appropriate title for their role. Within the two NZEI surveys, only 35% of survey respondents believed that SENCO was the best role title with 65% of respondents either disagreeing or unsure. When asked to give suggestions of a more appropriate role title, comments included “learning support coordinator”, “education needs coordinator”, “learning and behaviour coordinator”, and “inclusive education coordinator”. These terms all suggest that SENCOs prefer a term that encompasses a wider range of learning needs, not just special needs, suggesting SENCOs recognise and support students with a wider array of needs. I was not able to find any other research in a New Zealand context that questioned the appropriateness of the role title; therefore, this became a question for the surveys and case study interviews.

In summary, research indicates New Zealand SENCOs are experienced educators with the majority of SENCOs holding at least ten years of experience (either in teaching and/or the SENCO role) in New Zealand schools (Kearney et al, 2017). Despite a lack of prescriptive training or qualifications in New Zealand, these findings suggest that New Zealand school employers consider extensive experience necessary to fulfil the SENCO role (Harrington, 2016; Lin, 2020; Storer, 2002).

3.3 Themes and Debates within the Research Literature

Due to the lack of formal role descriptors for the NZ SENCO role and lack of handbooks or guidelines, I turned to the research literature to learn what is known about the specifics of the SENCO role and workload, and the key issues as reported by the research. Once again, due to the limited New Zealand research, I have drawn from international literature, particularly research literature in England. This section will briefly cover major themes and arguments within the research, including insufficient time and additional responsibilities, time and wellbeing, high turnover, resourcing, support, relationships, and the lack of experiences in the literature.

3.3.1 No Role Descriptors and Additional Responsibilities

A central debate in the literature, evident in both New Zealand and England concerns the absence of regulated role descriptors and the frequent expectation that SENCOs take on additional responsibilities alongside their core role— issues researchers largely attribute to the lack of formal regulation. Notably, this debate appears in the literature for both New Zealand and England, despite England having far more regulations governing the SENCO role.

Although the SENCO role is regulated in England, this formalisation of the role does not seem to give more certainty around role descriptors. Researchers in England note that national descriptors of the SENCO role are still vague and open to interpretation. As Smith and Broomhead (2019) argue, “the description of the role of the SENCO, as outlined by the Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2014 [Department for Education, Department of Health]) illustrates an extremely wide and complex remit” (p. 55). Researchers have argued that this wide and complex remit has led to SENCOs not being provided with adequate time to do the role as well as being expected to hold additional responsibilities alongside SENCOs.

Researchers have criticised the expectation for SENCOs to hold multiple responsibilities, to be a barrier to effectively fulfilling the SENCO role. Many SENCOs hold additional responsibilities in conjunction with their SENCO role (Smith, 2022; Smith & Broomhead, 2019; Tissot, 2013). SENCOs in England often hold teaching positions, positions of responsibility (deans or senior leadership), and, for secondary SENCOs, this additional responsibility is most commonly subject-specific teaching time (Smith, 2022b). Researchers have found that SENCOs struggle to balance these responsibilities, feeling as if neither role is performed to the best of their abilities (Smith, 2022; Tissot, 2013). Additional responsibilities “impede their ability to manage their role effectively” (Smith & Broomhead, 2019, p. 61). All participants in Smith and Broomhead’s (2019) study (15 SENCOs) had additional responsibilities, such as being full-time teachers, information and communication technology (ICT) coordinators, or assessment coordinators. The SENCOs in this study “unanimously reported that they did not have enough time allocated to the role to fulfil their SEND [special educational needs and disabilities] responsibilities” (Smith &

Broomhead, 2019, p. 66). The wide and varied job descriptors make it difficult to effectively fulfil the SENCO role (Rosen-Webb, 2018; Smith & Broomhead, 2019).

In the New Zealand literature, similar arguments emerge to those in England: the absence of clear guidelines and role descriptors has resulted in significant variation in how the SENCO role is enacted across schools with many SENCOs also carrying multiple additional responsibilities. Identifying a lack of research around SENCOs in New Zealand schools, Kearney et al. (2017) researched how the SENCO role has manifested itself in schools, particularly given the lack of policy, mandate, and guidelines for SENCOs. Their survey findings further highlight the variability of the SENCO role across schools and the dual responsibilities that many SENCOs are required to manage. When asked to document how the SENCOs spent their time over a week, the diverse findings illustrate the autonomy offered to each New Zealand school in how to manage this SENCO position. Every participant in Kearney et al.'s survey stated that they held the SENCO position in conjunction with other roles in the school, such as classroom teaching and other management positions, like assistant/deputy principal or syndicate leader. Lin's (2020) research furthered this argument by examining the sense of SENCO identity. Lin found that those who held the SENCO role full time had a stronger sense of identity when compared with those who held the same role part time, including other responsibilities such as teaching. Part-time SENCOs, or those with additional responsibilities, were more likely to voice uncertainty and vulnerability in their identities (Lin, 2020).

Therefore, research in England and New Zealand suggests that the wide and varied role descriptors (or potentially the complete lack of descriptors) has led to roles and workloads varying widely across schools. As a result of a lack of clear role expectations, many SENCO individuals hold additional responsibilities, which adds to the challenges of time and a sense of identity. Role descriptors and additional responsibilities would become important areas of questioning for the case study interviews.

3.3.2 Insufficient Time and Wellbeing

A recurring criticism identified across research conducted in England is the limited time available for SENCOs to effectively fulfil all aspects of their role, largely due to the extensive administrative demands. Research within England highlights the SENCO role's lack of time and resources and the detrimental impacts of those (Pearson, 2008; Smith & Broomhead, 2019; Tissot, 2013). Smith and Broomhead (2019), concerned with the time allocated to the role, conducted semistructured interviews with 15 SENCOs working in mainstream primary schools in Northwest England. These interviews revealed that 90% of participant SENCOs cited lack of time as their greatest challenge. Difficulties in the role were reportedly compounded by the fact that there are no national guidelines for time allocation.

Research also highlights that insufficient time and wellbeing pressures are contributing to SENCO burnout at an alarming rate. One researcher, Embich (2001), specifically investigated burnout among secondary school SENCOs. Embich responded to the educational phenomenon that “retaining experienced and accomplished special education teachers continues to be one of the most distressing issues our profession faces” (Embich, 2001, p. 58). His qualitative case study research of over 300 secondary special education teachers in England concluded that they were “experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion” (p. 58). Embich used the results of his surveys and interviews to conclude that five factors significantly contribute to professional burnout for special education coordinators: role ambiguity, role conflict, lack of education, lack of experience, and the support of management. Interestingly, Embich (2001) concluded that the feelings of depletion, fatigue, and overextension are due to the expansion of the role and responsibilities. Another researcher, Smith (2022), concluded that persisting in these challenging situations of exhaustion is just something expected of modern-day SENCOs: “This is what contemporary SENCOs ‘do’ – they persist in exceptionally difficult circumstances ...” (p.14). Smith’s quote suggests that managing an overwhelming workload and challenging circumstances may just be an expectation of the SENCO role.

Concerned about the high turnover of SENCOs in England, Pearson (2008) conducted a survey of 100 SENCOs to examine recruitment issues, and the extent and nature of the

support offered to the role. Pearson put forward the possibility that large administrative workloads are contributing to the high turnover of SENCOs. Seventy-four per cent of the respondents in her study stated that the decade 1998–2008 had seen a drastic expansion in duties and expectations of the SENCO role. Those same respondents stated that the hours and resourcing allocated to the SENCO role are not sufficient to fulfil this growing list of expectations and tasks. Pearson (2008) used her study to highlight the large administrative workloads detrimental to SENCOs' wellbeing and retention of SENCOs in England.

In a similar study, Tissot (2013), concerned by SENCOs' sense of wellbeing in their role, conducted a questionnaire of British SENCOs' perceptions of their role and follow-up semistructured interviews. Tissot sent an optional questionnaire to all SENCOs at induction time (the start of their SEN training) and repeated this after the "National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination (NASENCO)", the compulsory qualification for all SENCOs in England. Between 2010 and 2012, of the 155 participant SENCOs, 146 (94%) enrolled in this qualification. More in-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted with 10 SENCOs after their training to gain an in-depth understanding of the role's challenges. The key finding of Tissot's study was that SENCOs struggle with resource management and do not have enough time to complete their duties, so some tasks (particularly paperwork) are prioritised over other tasks. Notably, only 12% of the SENCOs who participated in Tissot's study were in secondary schools, which suggests a gap in these research findings regarding workload for secondary SENCOs.

To date, I have not found any research that specifically investigates the impact of workload on the wellbeing of New Zealand SENCOs. However, there is considerable mention within the New Zealand research regarding the insufficient time for the New Zealand SENCO role and issues of resourcing and support. New Zealand research studies indicate that resourcing is an issue for SENCOs with Harrington (2016), Kearney et al. (2017), and Storer (2002) all arguing that SENCOs struggled with access to funding and resources and a lack of time to complete the many tasks of the role. These researchers all argued that SENCOs are already working at capacity with time and resourcing constraints. Storer (2002), in an examination of SENCOs in New Zealand primary schools, found that "a considerable number of SENCOs consider more time, funding and resources are the significant factors that would assist them

in their role” (p. 3). A government-level review – ERO (2010) also noted issues with a heavy workload for SENCOs. It is important to note that this finding was made in 2010, but I could not yet find any evidence of changes or further research to address this workload in the years since the report’s publication. Harrington (2016) furthered this argument four years later by stating that “the problem is that SENCOs are often not resourced or trained for the role, and many are already working at capacity” (para. 12). Viewed together, these findings underscore that, despite clear evidence of time and resource pressures on New Zealand SENCOs, there remains a notable lack of research examining how these workload challenges affect their wellbeing, highlighting a critical area for future study.

Research literature in both England and New Zealand suggests that SENCOs often work in isolation with very few formal support networks. Although there are formal networks of support in England, some SENCOs still express a feeling of separation in the SENCO role and a belief that they are “on their own”. Pearson (2008), in a survey of SENCOs across England, found that survey participants commonly spoke about the isolation of the role. One of Pearson’s survey respondents stated, “This is a very lonely job. I have set up informal networks in my area to support this but you are mostly on your own doing it, which I think is a big factor for people leaving/feeling like they are not equipped to do the job” (Pearson, 2008, p. 25). Interestingly, this quote from a survey respondent suggests that, although the Department for Education has established formal support networks for SENCOs, many individual SENCOs still feel isolated and believe they need to use their own initiative to form and create their own support networks.

New Zealand research argues that New Zealand SENCOs face a similar level of isolation and lack of support. A NZEI (2018) survey found that 46% of SENCOs were not able to collaborate with other SENCOs due to a lack of time, geographical isolation, or a lack of contacts. The study concluded that almost half of SENCOs in New Zealand schools are professionally isolated: “this means that there is likely to be a sense of professional isolation in this role, with SENCOs having to negotiate systems and processes independently” (NZEI, 2018, p. 10). Investigating support networks available to New Zealand SENCOs, I found the Learning Support Network, an online support network created in partnership with the Ministry of Education and a tertiary provider, offering a platform of resources and

opportunities to collaborate (Learning Support Network, 2025), although there is a membership needed to access these resources. Consequently, due to the variability in support networks available to SENCOs in New Zealand, identifying and examining areas of support emerged as a central focus of my research study.

3.3.3 Importance of Relationships

Coming into this research as an insider-researcher, I had observed the number of people SENCOs interact with, almost daily, to fulfil their roles. Therefore, it was surprising that I could only find one piece of New Zealand research that looked specifically at relationships in the SENCO role. Lin (2020), in her case study of four primary school SENCOs in a New Zealand context, identified many relationships with other professionals, which were considered by participants to be crucial to their identity as SENCOs. Relationships Lin (2020) identified included those with students, teachers, teacher aides, senior leadership, RTLBs, psychologists, public health nurses, and many more. As Lin (2020) explained, “SENCOs frequently turned to their SENCO colleagues, RTLBs and other professionals outside the school for advice via emails, phone calls and face-to-face meetings” (p. 191). Lin (2020) demonstrated an awareness of the importance of these relationships to SENCO identity by concluding, “it is important for SENCOs to build relationships with a variety of people internal and external to the school” (p. 180). She identified the presence of relationships in fulfilling the role, but I could not find other research or more in-depth investigations of these relationships specific to the SENCO role.

Research closely aligned with this study is that of Wright (2022), who investigated the roles and workload of heads of department (HODs) in New Zealand secondary schools. Wright highlighted that relationships were central to these middle-management roles, yet little recognition or time was provided to sustain them. As Wright explains, “The relationships HODs in this study had with others at school were a central aspect of their professional lives while they struggled to maintain them in the fact of little flexible time” (p. 130). In this quote, Wright (2022a) argues that relationships within the education sector are crucial, yet educational professionals struggle to find the time to maintain these relationships. In the New Zealand context, these were the only two educational researchers – Lin (2020) and Wright (2022a) - who examined the significance of relationships in enacting a role. This gap

in the literature motivated me to investigate both the nature and the impact of relationships within the case studies.

3.4 Lack of Representation in Leadership

I found a considerable amount of debate within the research, particularly research conducted in England, discussing and criticising the leadership aspects of the SENCO role. Arguments within the research literature state that the SENCO individual is responsible for leadership (particularly by leading policy reforms across the school), yet the leadership aspect of the role is often unrecognised by management, and SENCOs are not given the capacity to lead (Curran, 2019; Northouse, 2013; Tissot, 2013). English researchers argue that there is a “mismatch” between the expectations of the SENCO individual to lead and the practicalities of the role where SENCOs are often left out of leadership and not given the capacity to carry out leadership in practice (Edwards, 2017; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Smith, 2022a). Despite the English Code of Practice advocating for SENCOs to be given a leadership role or included in the school’s leadership team, only 38.2%—less than half of SENCOs in England—held any form of leadership role (Dodbson, 2019). Smith and Broomhead (2019) argue that a barrier to the role is not being included on the senior leadership team (SLT), and Maher and Vickerman (2018) argue that including SENCOs on the SLT enhances the voices of diverse learning needs in the school.

Researchers have stressed that there is an expectation, both in formal qualifications and in job descriptions, that SENCOs are leaders, but, in reality, leadership opportunities are lacking. Leadership makes up a significant component of the teaching and assessment in the National Award for SEN Coordination as the award assumes that SENCOs will take up strategic leadership roles in their own schools (Smith, 2022a). The compulsory SENCO training asks SENCOs to move from a teaching role into a leadership role where they are responsible for moving the school forward in SEN policy and provisions (Rosen-Webb, 2011). Northouse (2013) identifies 24 aspects of leadership that are embedded in many job descriptions for SENCOs, including establishing direction, creating a vision, aligning people, and making job placements. However, Smith (2002a) finds that the degree to which a SENCO can lead very much depends on the SENCO’s place within their school—specifically,

the level of autonomy offered to the SENCO and the SENCO's place within the school leadership team. Smith (2002a) found that those SENCOs with low levels of autonomy and involvement in management-level decision making were only able to act with influence on a "surface level" (Smith, 2022a, p. 94).

Tension arises when a SENCO seeks to fulfil the leadership aspect of their role and job description, but the school's systems or hierarchy limit their authority. This can result in SENCOs being excluded from decision making and denied genuine leadership opportunities within the school (Bell, 1999). Smith (2022a) argues that an imbalance of power is created when SENCOs do not have the status as middle management or senior leaders. The lack of autonomy and leadership afforded to some SENCOs has the potential to "undermine the identity of the SENCO" (Smith, 2022b, p. 3). Bell (1999) believes that SENCOs need guidelines on how to perform as leaders within their individual schools. Tissot (2013) sent out a questionnaire to all new-trained SENCOs, finding that the vast majority of SENCOs were not provided with any cross-school leadership opportunities; however, if these opportunities were provided, SENCOs felt they have the resources to perform their duties adequately. Rosen-Webb (2011) found that a lack of cross-school leadership opportunities and limited resource management were the most restricting factors of the role. In Rosen-Webb's study, those SENCOs who were given leadership opportunities across the school had greater control of resources and therefore felt they had more impact in their role.

There is evidence in English literature that SENCOs are often responsible for understanding and carrying out policy and reforms, therefore being required to take on a leadership role in the school. Curran (2019) conducted 15 in-depth semistructured interviews with primary school SENCOs to ascertain reactions to the new SEND reforms. Although these SEND reforms are government directives, Curran (2019) found that SENCO individuals had taken leadership initiatives towards these rather than school management teams. All participants in Curran's study had taken responsibility for interpreting the SEND reforms, making sense of these, and interpreting the necessary changes for their school leadership teams. However, Curran (2019) notes that very few of these SENCOs were part of the school's leadership team, despite the active role they had in leading their individual schools through policy reform.

Within the guidelines for SENCOs, there is very little explicit mention regarding how SENCOs should carry out their leadership roles. Edwards (2017) describes SENCOs as “whole school movers and shakers” (p. 84) but details their responsibilities as “managers of relationships” (p.85) and managing the training of additional adults. Cowne et al. (2019) provide a useful guidebook to help SENCOs support staff and students, but no mention is made of whole-school leadership.

The literature also suggests that the many administrative tasks of the SENCO role keep the individuals in these roles busy and may prevent opportunities to take on whole-school leadership. Tissot (2013) argues that the lack of SENCO involvement at the leadership level “is stifling the vision of the role as well as its implementation in practice. This constrains the good work that SENCOs can do and instead keeps this group of skilled practitioners immersed in paperwork” (p. 39). Fitzgerald & Radford (2022) support this argument by commenting that the number of administrative tasks required by SENCOs restricts many from engaging in leadership or strategic-level opportunities.

School management in England has an impact on the level of leadership offered to the individual in the SENCO role. The research literature argues strongly for the importance of inclusion of SENCOs within leadership teams. Cole (2005) conducted a study in England where he surveyed 59 SENCOs to focus on perceptions of their roles. Using a qualitative design and semistructured questionnaires of the 59 SENCOs, Cole found that the biggest indicators of a SENCO’s apparent “success” were SENCOs holding a senior management position or SENCOs with access to budgets. Cole’s study argues for the importance of SENCOs holding leadership positions and having access to resources. Similarly, later research by Ekins (2012) argues that SENCOs need to be recognised within leadership teams to allow SENCOs the opportunity to enact this level of leadership that is expected within their roles. Ekins (2012) comments:

... it is widely accepted that, to be effective, the SENCO needs to be a strategic leader
... the reality in practice is that many SENCOs are still not senior leaders within their schools, and that in some schools there is a continuing situation where the Senior

Leadership Team within the school actually undervalues and limits the SENCOs' opportunities to effect real change and development within the school. (p. 77)

To date, I have been unable to locate any New Zealand research that explicitly examines the leadership dimension of the SENCO role. This was puzzling given the plethora of international research, particularly in England, and the multitude of debates and arguments within the research (Bell, 1999; Smith & Broomhead, 2019; Cole, 2005; Curran, 2019; Dobson, 2019; Maher & Vickerman, 2018; Smith, 2013; Tissot, 2013). This led me to question whether the leadership aspect of New Zealand SENCOs is not an expectation or is yet unexplored. Given the extent of international research and debate surrounding the leadership aspect of SENCOs, this would become an important discussion point within case study interviews.

3.5 SENCO Experiences are Missing from the Literature

Researchers have argued that SENCO experiences are missing from the existing literature, and this is a gap in the research that requires attention (Curran, 2019; Dobson & Douglas, 2020; Lin, 2020; Rosen-Webb, 2011). This chapter has documented that there are numerous research studies investigating the SENCO role, particularly in England, but there is a noticeable gap in terms of SENCO individual experiences of "voice". Rosen-Webb (2011) argues for the importance of more research into the SENCO role, particularly in light of increasing demands. Based on a concern for SENCOs' views of their identity, values, and roles, Rosen-Webb (2011) conducted an in-depth qualitative study using semistructured interviews of nine SENCOs working in nine secondary schools in England to investigate the perceptions SENCOs had of their roles. This is the only research study I could find that focuses specifically on secondary school SENCOs. Rosen-Webb stated that "despite the importance given to the role (in policy), there is little research regarding SENCOs perceptions of their identity, values and roles ..." (p.1). She states that since the introduction of the 1994 "Code of Practice" (Department for Education, 1994), the responsibilities and duties of the SENCOs have increased dramatically with little to no research or investigation, particularly around the beliefs and attitudes of SENCOs. Similarly, Dobson & Douglas (2020) argue that research literature has not yet examined the

experiences of the individuals in these roles: “Most research on SENCOs has been conducted at the level of the organisation or school rather than that of the person. There are limited studies that look at the SENCOs themselves rather than the role they fulfil” (para. 2). I was interested to see whether this was also the case with New Zealand research, and whether there were any New Zealand research studies that had specifically examined SENCO individual voices and experiences. This was a gap I intended to address with my own research.

A key critique raised by New Zealand researcher Lin (2020) is that, although some literature documents the practical aspects of the SENCO role, there has been little examination of SENCO identities within the New Zealand context. Lin’s case study research on primary school SENCOs is one of the more recent research studies specifically exploring the SENCO role in New Zealand (Lin, 2020; Lin et.al, 2023). Motivated by a perceived lack of research examining SENCO identities, Lin (2020) was interested in how personal and contextual factors influence SENCOs’ identity and conducted a qualitative interpretive case study research of five primary school SENCOs in Auckland, New Zealand, involving focus group discussions, semistructured interviews, and shadow research to explore how the role of SENCO in New Zealand influences teacher identities. The study’s major findings highlight that SENCOs have a strong sense of teacher agency, resulting from high levels of flexibility and autonomy; however, due to the high levels of autonomy and the variability in enacting the role, SENCOs may face the challenges of identity formation (Lin et al., 2023). Concluding the research, Lin (2020) argues that, while the autonomy offered to SENCOs is of some benefit, a balance is needed; schools should maintain some level of autonomy in the SENCO role while providing nationwide recognition and support to assist a strong sense of SENCO identity.

In addition to the limited breadth of existing literature, studies focusing specifically on SENCOs in secondary schools appear to be particularly scarce. I have not yet been able to find any research or case studies focusing particularly on the role of SENCOS in New Zealand secondary schools. As New Zealand secondary schools are often much larger than primary schools and more complex in terms of timetables and the number of staff, I considered this a large gap in research understanding of the role of SENCOs in New Zealand. Harrington

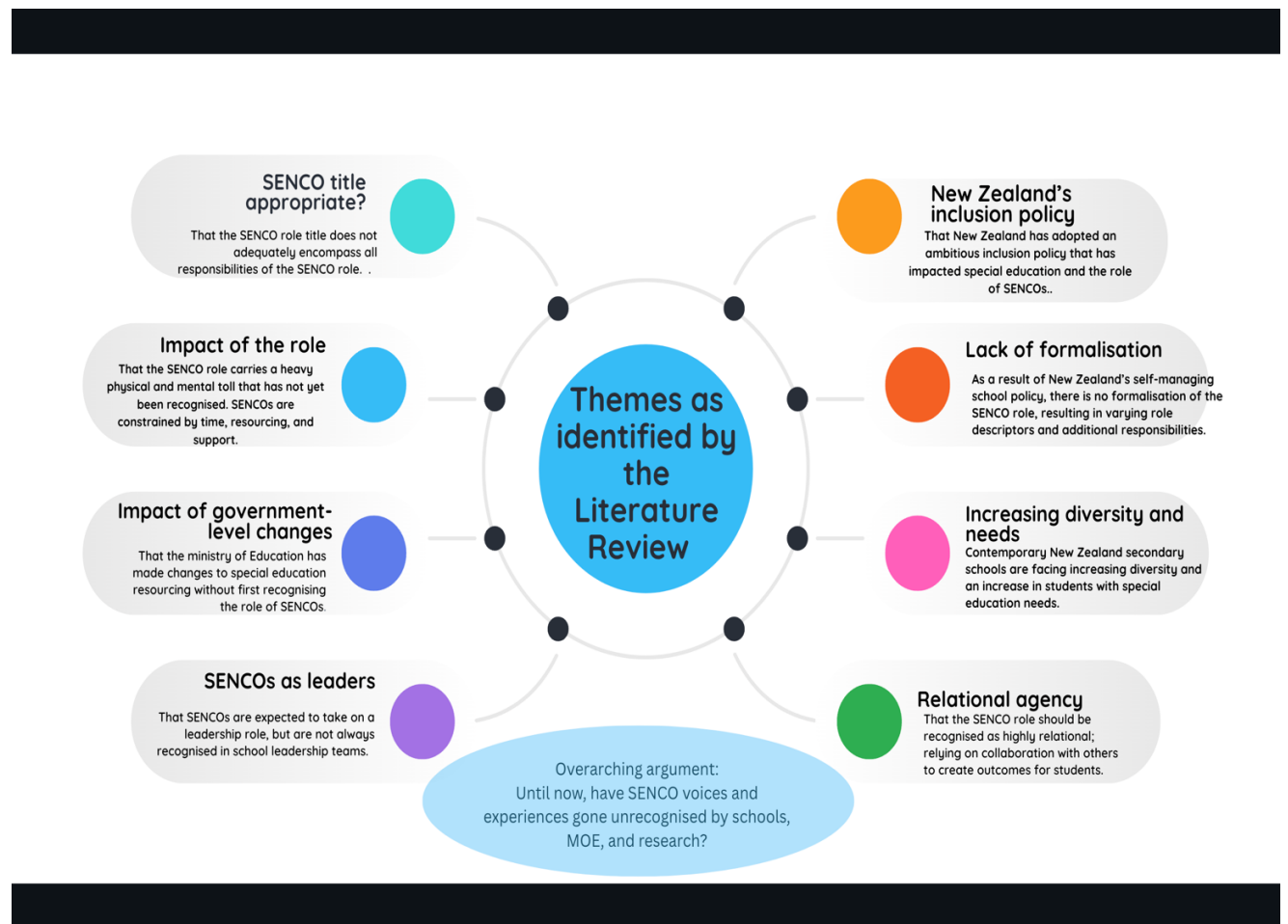
(2016), Kearney et al. (2017), Lin (2020), Storer (2002), and Symes (2014) all conducted research studies primarily focused on the SENCO role within primary schools. These studies looked at job descriptions for the SENCO role in primary schools (Harrington, 2016), a manifestation of the role in (primarily) primary schools (Kearney et al., 2017), identity studies of primary school SENCOs (Lin, 2020), what the SENCO role entails in a primary school setting (Storer, 2022), and decision-making processes for SENCOs in primary schools (Symes, 2014). Within Lin's (2020) research study, the gap of understanding regarding secondary school SENCOs was acknowledged: "the study focused on primary school SENCOs. The findings may not apply for secondary school SENCOs as secondary schools are quite different from primary schools" (p. 203). Lin also acknowledges that all participants were from Auckland, so comparisons with SENCOs across New Zealand are not appropriate. Therefore, her research was unable to document whether similar pressures and challenges of SENCO identity were similar in schools outside of Auckland. This gap in New Zealand's research literature provided further motivation for my own study.

3.6 Chapter Summary and Refined Research Plan

Jane's quote in the epigraph for this chapter suggests that there is very little known about SENCO work in New Zealand or around the world. However, this literature review has demonstrated that there is research literature documenting the role of SENCOs, both internationally and here in New Zealand. This chapter, Chapter Three, has summarised the key findings in the research literature, alongside the gaps and areas for further research, particularly highlighting the experiences of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools as an identified gap in the existing literature.

To summarise the two chapters of this literature review, I have identified the key themes, debates, and gaps in the literature and have presented these illustratively in Figure 1.

Figure 1:
Summary of Themes as Identified by the Literature Review



These key themes, debates and questions, alongside the research questions, now frame my research study and chosen methods of data collection. At the conclusion of this thesis, I return to this illustration of key themes and position my findings alongside those identified in the literature. I then consider how my research contributes to, extends, or challenges these existing findings while also drawing attention to any new insights offered to the field.

Analysis of the available research literature has revealed key themes, critiques, and ongoing debates. These insights have informed the development of the research questions alongside questionings for the survey and case studies. Unpacking the key themes in the research

literature, which were mentioned in Chapter One, but are repeated here

1. What are the characteristics of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools?
2. What are the perceptions and experiences of these SENCOs of their roles?
3. How do SENCOs engage relational agency to support their work within secondary schools?

The following chapter, Chapter Four, outlines the theoretical foundations of this study, the conceptual lenses that informed its design and implementation, the methodological decisions made to address the research questions, and an overview of the ethical considerations involved.

Chapter Four: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

What frustrates me is that no two SENCO experiences are the same. People try to lump us all in the same boat, but my role could not be more different from the SENCOs down the road at the other two schools. What works for one SENCO in one school will definitely not work for another SENCO. That's what I wish people would realise—each SENCO role is so different according to the school, the kids, the community ... and the sooner people start realising how unique our roles are and understanding that, the better!

—Liz, SENCO case study participant, March 2021

Liz's quote in the epigraph highlights the unique context of the New Zealand SENCO role, perhaps due to the self-managing nature of the New Zealand educational system and decision making of each individual school. Throughout this research, it was important for me to choose methodologies that would acknowledge these differences and the individualities of the role, realising that no two experiences will be the same and allowing individual voices to be heard. This chapter, Chapter Four, explores the methodological decisions I have made to acknowledge individual SENCO experiences in New Zealand secondary schools.

I begin by examining the methodological approaches and the constructivist paradigm that underpin my research design (Section 4.1), followed by a discussion of qualitative research methods (Section 4.2). Next, I explain the rationale for adopting a sequential research structure (Section 4.3), which incorporates two distinct methods across two stages. Section 4.3 details all decisions related to Stage One, the electronic survey, while Section 4.4 outlines the design and implementation of Stage Two, the case studies. Section 4.5 introduces the theoretical lens of relational agency, and finally, Section 4.6 addresses ethical considerations, including my role as a researcher. The next section details the choices behind the framing of this research: a constructivist paradigm, subjectivist epistemology, and deductive as well as inductive research approaches.

4.1 Methodological Approaches

This section outlines my positioning and experience as a researcher, recognising the beliefs, values, and intentions I bring to this study. Researchers emphasise the importance of establishing a “location of self”—an acknowledgement of a researcher’s position in qualitative research from the outset of the research design (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Flick, 2018; Hertz, 1997). This research is not context neutral, and the beliefs and values I bring to this research underpin my choices. As an interpretive researcher, I acknowledge that research is shaped by biography, social class, gender, and race (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), and the same is true for my research participants. From an interpretivist ontological perspective, I believe that reality is multiple and socially constructed. People understand and experience the world in different ways depending on their context, values, and interactions, so there is not just one objective truth. My epistemological stance is that knowledge is gained through interpreting the meanings people attach to their experiences. Understanding comes from exploring how individuals make sense of their world rather than trying to measure or quantify an external reality.

4.1.1 Constructivism as an Overarching Paradigm

Driven by a motivation to highlight individual experiences and to document individual voices, I have chosen the constructivist paradigm to underpin my research study. The constructivist paradigm, emphasised by Guba and Lincoln (1994), evolved from the naturalistic paradigm, initially developed through their work beginning in 1985. Denzin and Lincoln (1994), who championed this paradigm, suggest the paradigm encompasses trustworthiness and internal validity, and the chosen methodology associated with this paradigm is often interpretive case studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The constructivist paradigm is underpinned by an ontology of the belief that “people construct their realities based on their experiences and interpretations” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 3). Therefore, there are “multiple realities” based on these different experiences and interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within a constructivist paradigm, “reality” is made by people in social ways; it is a product of mutual understanding. Constructivists accept that there is a reality, but it cannot be measured; it is only perceived through the

lens of each person's experience and knowledge (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interpretivist epistemology focuses on understanding how individuals construct meaning and interpret their social world, emphasising subjectivity and multiple realities (Nickerson, 2024). What we know is always subjective and filtered through people (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Therefore, multiple realities and truths are appreciated in this paradigm.

Constructivists seek to explain what their study has shown “regardless of whether their findings can be extended beyond the time and circumstances of the current study” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 16). Therefore, statistics and data are less important than how people interpret what they have experienced (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The constructivist paradigm values the participants' voices and experiences, which aligns with my beliefs as a researcher as well as the aims for this study. By choosing this paradigm, I am also acknowledging that the experiences of each SENCO may be completely different based on experience, content, and interpretation. By adopting this constructivist paradigm, I aim to honour these varied experiences, such as the views Liz voiced in the epigraph for this chapter.

4.1.2 Subjectivist Epistemology

Next, it was important to select an epistemology within the constructivism paradigm—a guide to help with what knowledge would be gathered and from which sources. For my research, a subjectivist epistemology was adopted with a belief that knowledge is cocreated. Rather than myself as a researcher remaining objective and researching a “subject”, the subjectivist epistemology assumes that I will be inherently involved in the research in my role as a researcher and co-constructing knowledge with the research participants. Stake (2010) argues that this subjective epistemology is essential to understanding human activity. As I shared attributes with the participants (educators), I could be considered an insider researcher (Bukamal, 2022). Acknowledging my position as an active researcher, I drew on my own experiences, knowledge, and assumptions within the education sector to inform this study. Rubin and Rubin (2012) take this idea of the active involvement of the researcher even further, describing the researchers as “active participants in the research; their personalities, their knowledge, their curiosity, and their sensitivity all impact the quality of the work” (p. 17). Furthermore, the voices and interpretations of the subjectivist researcher need to be important and obvious in the write-

up (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lee, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). My role as an “active participant” in the research would become particularly necessary in the semistructured interviews, in which I was required to actively listen and interact with participants. I discuss the semistructured interviews and acknowledge my participation in these interviews later in this chapter (see Section 4.6.2).

4.1.3 Deductive and Inductive Research Approaches

This research acknowledges the use of both deductive and inductive research approaches. Deductive reasoning was necessary due to my knowledge and experience working in the education sector. Hyde (2000) explains that deductive reasoning commences with a theory or generalisation, then examines this theory through specific instances. Due to my teaching experience, I came to this research with some pre-existing generalisations from my own experience working alongside SENCOs in secondary schools as well as some of the background research I had conducted. My intention was to examine these assumptions as hypotheses through data collection to question whether these assumptions applied to specific instances. Therefore, I was using what Casula et al. (2000) refer to as a working hypothesis - a hypothesis regarding the lack of recognition of SENCOs, their workload, and increasing student needs.

Additionally, an inductive research approach was also used to allow for findings outside of my initial hypotheses and assumptions. Yin (2016) explains that an inductive approach allows the case to reveal its reality first, and only later does one compare the reality with their earlier propositions. This argument is aligned with the work of Brinkman (2014) and Neuman (1994), who also emphasise that an inductive approach is important in qualitative research to let themes and realities present themselves. Using inductive reasoning alongside deductive reasoning was important as it allowed unexpected findings to emerge and be acknowledged, leading to the development of themes I had not previously identified.

The integration of both deductive and inductive reasoning was particularly important in conjunction with my theoretical lens of relational agency. After reviewing the literature, I became interested in exploring the relationships SENCOs engage in to enact agency, including the factors that enable or constrain these relationships. Deductive reasoning was

applied to illuminate participants' experiences of relationships and relational agency while inductive reasoning was employed due to the limited research available on relational agency in the SENCO role. Given the scarcity of studies specifically addressing relational agency, I relied heavily on my perspective as an insider-researcher to examine these professional relationships. Recognising that little was known about the types of relationships SENCOs hold or the ways in which they enact agency, I used inductive reasoning to allow insights into relational practice to emerge directly from the data.

Later in this chapter (section 4.4.5), I further unpack the proposed thematic analysis following the use of both deductive and inductive approaches. The next section, section 4.2, illustrates how the methods of inquiry were used practically to begin understanding these complex relationships and day-to-day realities for SENCO participants.

4.2 Qualitative Research Methods

In this section, I examine qualitative research methods to argue why these are the most effective methods for my research study and how the survey results can be incorporated descriptively in keeping with the qualitative research design. For this study, I adopt the following definition of qualitative methods, provided by Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and widely regarded by researchers as an appropriate description of qualitative inquiry (Flick, 2018; Lee, 2012; Mutch, 2013; Yin, 2016):

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world ... this means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

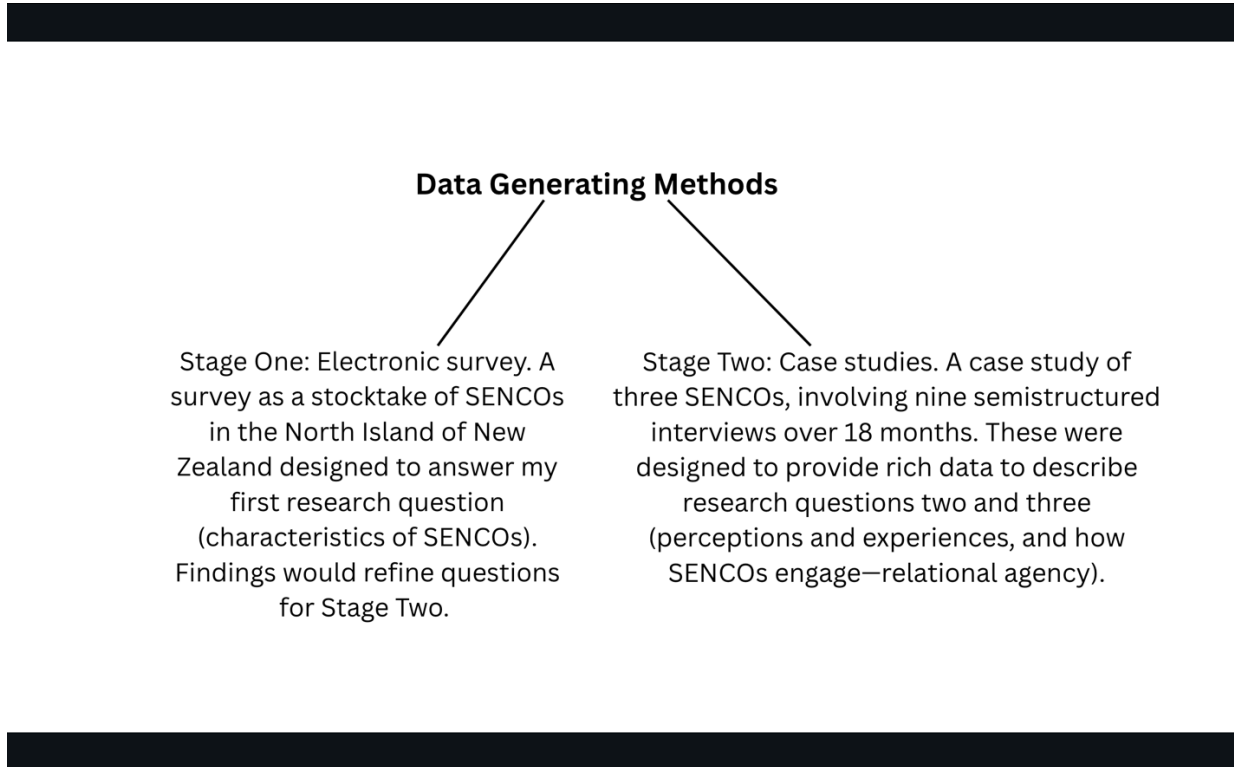
Qualitative researchers are interested in the perspectives of participants in everyday practice. One of the main uses of qualitative research methods is to understand how people cope in their real-world settings (Yin, 2016), and an underlying goal of my study is to capture individual SENCO views of their experiences, placing value on capturing an individual's point

of view (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Another key element of qualitative methods is the focus on securing rich description. I planned to go into secondary schools to interview participants in their place of work as a natural school day unfolded. From this natural setting, I hoped to understand the meanings and values SENCOs attached to their roles. These defining features of qualitative research methods were the key factors for selecting qualitative research methods.

Qualitative researchers use interconnected interpretive practices to understand the subject better (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Flick, 2018; Stake, 2010). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argue that each qualitative researcher makes the “world visible in a different way” (p. 3). Kalpokaite and Radivojevic (2019) confirm that while the choice of methods is diverse and can be overwhelming, the common approaches to conducting qualitative research are thematic and conceptual. The advice of authors such as these led me to choose two interconnected qualitative methods: a survey and case studies (encompassing semistructured interviews). The survey responses would provide some general but nonspecific understanding of the SENCO role across a selection of secondary schools in New Zealand. In contrast, the case studies would generate a richer understanding of the role of a SENCO and capture the voice of people in this position. I now address these data-gathering instruments in greater detail.

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the sequential research structure—Stage One and Stage Two—and the corresponding data collection methods (surveys and case studies).

Figure 2:
A Visual Representation of the Two Stages of Data Collection



First, I unpack the methodological choices for Stage One—the survey—including sampling, design of the survey, and analysis of survey results. The second half of this section examines methodological choices for Stage Two, the case studies.

4.3 Stage One: An Electronic Survey

This section examines all methodological decisions in regards to Stage One of the research, the electronic survey. Within this section, I consider sampling methods (4.3.1), considerations of survey design (4.3.2), distribution of the survey, practicalities of the survey (4.3.3), and analysis of survey data (4.3.4).

4.3.1 Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling was a necessary methodological decision due to the voluntary participation of the electronic survey. Yin (2016) also identifies purposive sampling as the

main sampling method of qualitative research. According to the Ministry of Education's (MOE; 2022) school information website, there are 374 secondary schools across New Zealand with approximately 80 across the central North Island region. I used school websites to obtain contact information for SENCOs, searching for terms on school websites, such as "SENCO", "learning support", "assisted learning", and other related titles. Where this information was not provided, I sent emails to the school offices to ask for contact details for the individuals filling these roles. In situations of possible gatekeeping, I sometimes needed to follow up with another email or phone call to obtain an email address. At the time the electronic survey was distributed (2020), Learning Support Coordinator roles had not yet been established in New Zealand schools. It can therefore be assumed that the majority of respondents were, at that time, serving as SENCOs. However, I did receive email correspondence from a small number of individuals with alternative role titles who sought clarification regarding the appropriateness of their participation in the survey. In very few cases, I learned that there was no individual within the school filling this role, and responsibility for additional learning needs was given to another staff member (often a senior leader). I emailed all potential survey participants an invitation and an information letter about the study (see Appendix E). Using these methods, I gained email contacts for 57 SENCOs (or similar titles) across central North Island secondary schools (approximately 75% of secondary schools within the region), then electronically sent my survey using Qualtrix software, alongside an accompanying email explaining the research.

4.3.2 Designing and Distributing the Survey

The first methodological tool I used was an online electronic survey to gain a broad understanding or stocktake of SENCOS working in secondary schools. Stake (2010) defines a survey as "... a set of questions or statements or scales—on paper, on the telephone, or the screen—usually asked the same way of all participants" (p. 99). Researchers, such as Jones et al. (2013), argue that there is a widespread belief that surveys are easy to conduct, but meaningful results require careful planning. Surveys have strengths and weaknesses. They are effective at examining large-scale patterns (Desimone & Le Floch, 2004), survey data can generalise to larger populations (Mutch, 2013), and a relatively large geographical area can be covered (Hinds, 2000). However, surveys cannot provide the depth of understanding provided by interviews and observations (Stake, 2010). Therefore, the choice of electronic

survey was fitting with my research design. As I wanted to survey SENCOS across a large geographical region, visiting participants on site would have been time consuming and costly. Surveying via electronic survey was the most practical choice given the geographical distance of SENCOS across the mid-North Island.

I drew on literature to guide strategies for maximising survey response rates. Researchers emphasise that surveys should begin with simple, important questions, followed by thematically grouped items, with introductory and concluding questions to frame the survey (Ball, 2019; Bell, 1997; Jones et al., 2013). Shorter surveys, ideally under 20 minutes, are most effective with participants informed upfront about time commitment (Jones et al., 2013). While open-ended questions capture richer data, they are more time intensive for both respondents and researchers whereas closed questions are quicker to complete and easier to analyse. A balance of both was therefore important to include (Bell, 1997). To minimise ambiguity, questions needed to be clearly worded as no interview follow up was available (Ball, 2019). Online delivery also offered the advantage of anonymity, reducing social desirability bias (Ball, 2019). These considerations informed the final survey design, length, and question structure, as shown in Appendix A.

Electronic surveys historically have a low response rate (Jones et al., 2013), reducing the amount of response data available to analyse. Ball (2019) argues that although online surveys are appealing to some participants as they could take their time responding to questions, the lack of an in-person interviewer does impact response rate. Nonresponse error affects the study's validity (Diem, 2004), and a plan to address this, or maximise the response rate, was considered in advance. As a monetary reward would not be possible in my study, I sent personalised email reminders to nonrespondents. While responses were recorded anonymously and were aggregated by the Qualtrix software, and therefore participants could be guaranteed the anonymity of their specific responses, the software provided a record of which respondents had not completed the survey. Diem (2004) finds that email reminders can increase response rate by approximately 14% each time; however, the author argues for negative consequences of reminding participants more than twice. Based on this advice, I only sent two reminder emails to respondents: one week after the initial email and another a week later.

The Qualtrix software helps promote a professional look to the survey, potentially helping to increase the response rate. Mahon-Haft and Dillman (2010) conducted a research study in the United States (US) based on the effectiveness of online surveys, finding that aesthetically displeasing screen design can detrimentally impact response rate and effort. The authors also found that when a greater effort is required (in open-ended questions), screen display directly impacts the length and quality of the written responses. Their study argues for the importance of clear, well-laid-out questioning, and slick graphics to improve response rates.

While electronic surveys are relatively easy to distribute, response bias can occur (Ball, 2019; Jones et al., 2013). The response bias that may have occurred in my study is that the respondents who completed the survey may have felt particularly strongly, one way or another, about their SENCO role. Those who do not feel as strongly opinionated about their role may not have felt compelled to respond. The response bias also favours those with time, which may have impacted my results. Unfortunately, there was no easy way to reduce this response bias, so it became a known source of bias in my study.

4.3.3 The Practicalities of the Survey

The survey aimed to address my first research question: establishing the characteristics of SENCOs in our secondary schools and understanding their experiences of their roles. I developed 27 questions for the electronic survey (see Appendix A), incorporating 15 open-ended and 12 closed questions. Questions were grouped into seven broad categories: experience/background, qualifications, feelings of preparedness, the role in practice, support and reporting, successes/challenges, and job satisfaction. Factors leading to question choice are displayed in Appendix B. Electronic surveys were sent to SENCOs working in North Island secondary schools to gain some understanding of SENCO demographics, experience, roles and responsibilities, and job satisfaction. Of the 57 surveys distributed, 17 were completed by individuals working in North Island secondary schools who hold the role of SENCO—or perform SENCO responsibilities under a different title—resulting in a 29% response rate.

There was a mix of tick box, rating, and short-answer questions in which participants would indicate what their role entailed, their workload, and their current responsibilities. The survey ended with short-answer open questions that allowed participants to indicate the successes and challenges of their role and feelings about job satisfaction and confidence in their role. I carefully tried to balance “need to know” questions while being mindful of the survey length to promote a high response rate. At the end of the survey, there was one question asking if survey participants would be willing to participate further in one-to-one interviews to allow me to identify potential participants for Stage Two of the research (case studies).

4.3.4 Data Analysis in Surveys

Data analysis in the survey involved developing descriptive statistics and thematic analysis of written responses. There were some quantitative data results in the survey, particularly in questions that ask participants to rate or rank their role responsibilities and job satisfaction (see survey questions in Appendix A). However, this quantitative data was dealt with as descriptive statistics only, in keeping with the qualitative nature of this study (Flick, 2018). Once I received the survey responses, I used the features within the Qualtrix software to help me organise and categorise the data.

For the open-ended survey responses, I turned to the literature for advice about coding and presenting. Rounder et al. (2021) argue that one of the complexities of open-ended questions is that there is no prescription for how respondents should answer, and the question can be open to interpretation, particularly when a researcher is not present. However, the advantage of these open-ended questions is they can provide enhancement to the quantitative or short-answer responses in the survey (Bell, 1997; Rounder et al., 2021). Rounder et al. (2021) recommend a selection of deductive and inductive coding, using codes of colour and shape, weight and size, or proximity and connection. For inductive coding, I was interested in highlighting key terms, such as “workload”, “accountability”, “satisfaction”, and “pressure”. For inductive coding, I used Rounder et al.’s (2021) advice to create a word cloud of common keywords in longer responses. The weight and size of these words helped the inductive identification of

emerging themes. I then created separate documents titled by key words, such as “responsibilities”, and added any quotes or evidence to these documents. I kept one document for each theme. I also printed individual responses (which are anonymous and cannot be linked back to the respondent) and highlighted these using colour coding (Rounder et al., 2021) and categorised these for further thematic analysis. The results of this survey are discussed thematically in Chapter Five, using subheadings for each category. Individual responses were used as quotations to illustrate certain themes, patterns, or surprises. Next, the methodological decisions are unpacked regarding Stage Two of the research study: the case studies.

4.4 Stage Two: Case Studies

To explore the rich experiences of SENCOs, my second method of inquiry was case studies. This section examines the practicalities of the case studies (4.4.1), semi-structured interviews (4.4.2), site of the interviews (4.4.3), approaching participants (4.4.4), transcribing and coding (4.4.5), and display of data (4.4.6).

Yin first defined case studies in 1981 as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in-depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). Stake (1995) provided a slightly alternative definition of a case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. 2). Although these definitions vary slightly, the commonalities emphasise the particularity and complexity of real-life situations. The distinction between case studies and other kinds of research is explained by Hammersley and Gomm (2000), who state that they differ in the number of cases to be studied and the amount of detail collected from each case. Therefore, within case study research, the focus is on gathering extensive information from a small sample. Swanborn (2010) refers to this as the intensive approach of case study research: the researcher focuses on one specific instance of the phenomenon to be studied or studies the phenomenon in great depth. For my research, the cases to be studied are individuals filling the SENCO roles in New Zealand secondary schools.

Despite criticisms of its lack of generalisability, case study research remains a powerful methodological tool for exploring complex, real-world phenomena. One of the biggest criticisms of case study research is the perceived inability to make scientific generalisations (Bassey, 1999; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). However, researchers such as Stake (1995) and Yin (2014) argue that the purpose of case study research is not to produce statistically generalisable findings, but to expand and refine theory and to illuminate lived experiences. Yin (2014) views the case study as a rigorous methodological approach suited to investigating contemporary phenomena within their natural contexts, while Stake (1995) emphasises its ability to capture the richness, uniqueness, and complexity of individual cases to generate meaningful insight. Thus, rather than being a lesser research tool, case study methodology offers a powerful means of deepening understanding and generating valuable theoretical and practical knowledge.

I decided to conduct three case studies with each “case” or unit of analysis being a SENCO participant. Researchers argue that while the sample size is typically small, the potential of case study research to generalise to larger theories or frameworks is just as applicable as any other research method (Stake, 1995; Swanborn, 2010; Yin, 2014). Therefore, my choice of a small case study of three SENCOs can still offer important findings and recommendations.

One of the key components of an effective case study is to define the “case” or unit of analysis, including a clear definition of the limits or bounds of the case. Yin (2014) states, “as a general guide, the tentative definition of your case (or of your unit of analysis) is related to the way you define your initial question(s)” (p. 31). Based on Yin’s advice, the definition for my “case” (unit of analysis) will be special education needs coordinators (SENCOs) currently employed in New Zealand secondary schools. When deciding whether to utilise a single or multiple case study, I used the advice from Yin (2014), who argues that conducting a single case study can be effective when it is a longitudinal case, thereby studying the same case at two or more different points in time. This is the intention of my study as I planned to interview participants at three different points during a school year. Unfortunately, case studies are vulnerable due to the small number of participants and the voluntary nature of

their participation (Yin, 2014). I allowed for this vulnerability by including three participants. If one were to withdraw, I could continue with two participants (two case studies).

4.4.1 Case Study Practicalities

Following on from a broad stocktake of SENCOs within the central North Island, I aimed to gather voice and in-depth experiences from SENCO participants by conducting three semistructured interviews with each participant—a total of nine semistructured interviews as detailed in Table 1. The number of interviews and the timing were intentional. Three interviews were important in terms of prolonged engagement and trustworthiness (detailed in Section 4.7.2). I felt that one or two interviews would not provide sufficient time to establish trust, so I conducted three interviews to foster a stronger relationship between the researcher and participants. It was also an intentional choice to conduct these interviews at three points in the year. The first interview point was August 2020. In the New Zealand school calendar, August is shortly into term three, half way through the school year. This is usually considered by teachers to be one of the quietest points of the year where classes are settled in routines, teachers and students are familiar with each other, and there are no pressing deadlines such as examinations. I hoped by beginning our interviews in August, this may be a quieter point in the year for SENCOs. The second interview point was set at the end of the New Zealand school year—December. This was intentionally chosen as one of the busiest times of the year: finishing classes, reporting, transitioning students, and setting up for the next school year, alongside tiredness at the end of the year. This interview point was chosen to get a sense of workload and tiredness at the end of a school year as well as reflections of the school year. The third interview point, April/May, was intentionally set to coincide with the start of term two. SENCO participants would have been through the busy beginning of year establishing students and teacher aides and would be well into their workload for the year. This was an important checkpoint to assess how the start of the year had been and how SENCO participants were feeling facing another year ahead. Table 1 provides details on the dates of the interviews as well as the length of interviews to provide context for the study. As can be seen in Table 1, the length of case study interviews increased as trust was built in subsequent interviews.

Table 1:
Dates and Lengths of Case Study Interviews

Interview	Date	Duration
Interview point one	August 2020	30–45 minutes
Interview point two	December 2020	60–75 minutes
Interview point three	April/May 2021	60–90 minutes

The following section details the main method of data collection within this case study: semistructured qualitative interviews.

4.4.2 Semistructured Interviews

Interviews are one of the most dominant methods in qualitative research (Brinkman & Kvale, 2018; Flick, 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Yin, 2016). Kvale (1996) provides a simple yet effective definition of interviews: “an inter view [sic] [is] an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (p. 2). This definition emphasises the importance of exchanging views and experiences between the researcher and the participant(s). Interviews are characterised by open-ended questions, lack of a formal script, conversational modes, and adaptability of questions to contexts (Yin, 2016). Cohen and Manion (1989) suggest that interviews within research serve three purposes: they are a main way of gathering information relating to the research objectives; they can be used to test hypotheses (or suggest new ones); and they can be used to support other methods (triangulation). In my case studies, interviews covered all three of these purposes to some extent. The interviews within my study were used to answer my research questions, uncover new information and themes (inductive reasoning), and triangulate with the survey results to provide another form of data.

Qualitative interviews aim to understand participants “on their own terms and how they make meaning of their own lives, experiences and cognitive processes” (Brenner, 2006, p. 357). This intensity in time and focus is important to gather an in-depth understanding of the topic and the issues from the participants’ perspectives (Mutch, 2013). Due to this conversational mode, qualitative interviews require intense listening to know the meaning of what is being said (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As a result, qualitative interviews provide the

opportunity to gain information that other methods cannot access (Wellington, 2000), allowing for follow-up questioning or questions to check for clarity.

Reflecting on the aim of my case studies and the involvement of three participants in my “cases”, I believed it was important to use semistructured interviews to ensure that similar questions were asked of all participants. At the same time, I would still have some flexibility in asking follow-up questions based on participants’ responses. It is imperative that, as a condition of qualitative research, people are empowered to say what they want to say rather than merely responding to preset questions (Yin, 2016). The semistructured qualitative interview model allowed participants to have the opportunity to say what they wanted to say and share their experiences. The semistructured interviews in this study asked participants about their roles/responsibilities, challenges and successes, day-to-day workload, and possible changes to their roles. The questions for the first semistructured interview are included in Appendix C. The next sections detail the logistics of sampling and participant considerations for the case studies.

4.4.3 Site of the Interviews

For Stage Two of my research, the case studies, the site of study was complicated and needed to be carefully considered. Although it made sense practically to hold the interviews at the SENCO’s school, this potentially held several disadvantages, including interruptions, and the ability for participants to talk openly and freely. Holding the interviews off site may have required participants to give up some of their own time or request time out of their workday. After carefully considering the advantages and disadvantages of the interview site, I decided to leave this decision up to the individual participant. In the consent letter, I explained that participants could meet at work during school hours or off site at a time and place of their choosing. This allowed participants to make the choice that had the least personal disadvantage to them. Two participants chose to meet on site during the school day whereas the third participant chose to conduct all interviews via Zoom video conferencing, also during the school day. The third participant made this decision due to concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.4.4 Approaching Participants

After obtaining the ethical approval of the University of Waikato, New Zealand (Waikato University Ethical Approval, FEDU047/20; see Appendix D, I began to contact potential participants. The electronic surveys had given participants an option to be contacted if they were willing to be involved in the second, more intensive stage of the research. Eight participants had indicated their interest. For convenience, I approached the three participants from schools that were closest to my own location as geographical proximity was important for the three interviews as well as any follow up that was needed. These participants were sent a case study information letter (see Appendix F) as well as a participant consent form (see Appendix G). Fortunately, all three participants that I approached consented to be part of the study. If any of these individuals had declined to be involved in the study, I planned to extend my geographical area one school at a time. Once I had three SENCOs and schools who agreed to participate, I would stop approaching potential participants. Fortunately, all three participants that I approached consented to be part of the study. If any of these individuals had declined to be involved in the study, I planned to extend my geographical area one school at a time. Table 2 provides more demographic information on the three case study participants.

Table 2:

Demographic Information for the Three Case Study SENCO Participants

Name (pseudonym)	School size (student numbers)	Experience/Qualifications	Time in education	Time in SENCO role	Hours for role (full-time equivalent)
Jane	500–1000	ECE, ESOL	20+ years	3 years	Part time
Kim	1000 +	Teacher aide	10 years	2 years	Full time
Liz	Under 500	Primary teaching, sociology	15 years	4 years	Full time

A deliberate decision was made in the research design to exclude identifying information about participants' schools in order to protect anonymity within New Zealand's relatively small education community. However, it was recognised that the socio-economic context of each school may constitute a relevant factor, as previous New Zealand research indicates that schools in lower socio-economic communities tend to experience higher levels of

student need, including greater demand for learning and inclusion support (Ministry of Education, 2024; Education Counts, 2025). All three participants in this study were based in schools characterised by mid-range socio-economic status. Although participants did not explicitly discuss the socio-economic context of their schools, this contextual factor is acknowledged as a consideration in interpreting the findings.

4.4.5 Transcribing and Coding Interviews Using Thematic Analysis

While I had created some semistructured questions for the first interview point, the questions for the second and third interview points were not predefined and evolved as the study progressed. As a reflective researcher, I needed to analyse the results of the first interview and then write subsequent interview questions that built on previous comments and themes while also linking back to my three research questions. Reflecting on my research notes and reflections and identifying emerging trends were ongoing tasks to direct the research. Different points of the year highlighted different considerations and challenges, and it was important to allow room for participants to share what was currently a priority for them. Interviews also acted as a research checkpoint to answer questions, share findings, and check on the wellbeing of participants. Building mutual trust between myself and the participants was essential to this research study.

My own reflections were very useful here for keeping track of questions that needed to be asked or areas that needed further investigation or understanding. Once I had finished transcribing and coding interviews, I kept a research notebook that kept a record of follow-up questions for interview two. I used these observations to amend questions for the next interview point, often adding questions or detail, or deleting potential research questions that I felt had been covered or had little relevance to the direction of the study. Figure 1 (Chapter 3), summarising the key themes from the literature review, served as a reference point.

I used a voice recorder to record interviews and manually transcribed the interviews over the following week. I followed a process of familiarisation of the data through transcribing of interviews and systematic coding of interviews of initial themes to the final refinement of

themes. While it was tempting to use digital technology to automatically transcribe these interviews, I found the process of transcribing the interviews manually to be particularly useful. As I transcribed each of the interviews, I kept a notebook beside me for noting thoughts, reflections, and questions. Based on my key questions, survey data, and findings in the research literature, there were several key ideas I was already looking for prior to conducting the interviews; therefore, a deductive reasoning was acknowledged.

“Demographics”, “prior experience”, “workload”, “role responsibilities”, “role status”, and “leadership” were all key terms I deductively searched for as I listened to the recordings and worked on the transcripts. When each of these terms or connotations appeared in a transcript, I colour-coded these responses. In addition, there were themes that appeared in the transcripts that I was not already aware of or not looking for. To identify these additional themes and to allow for inductive reasoning, I read through each of the transcripts several times, taking note of common themes/key words. I then went through each transcript, colour coding according to the recurrence of these ideas. When I came across quotes that I thought may be useful to highlight ideas or experiences, I copied and pasted these, keeping note of the origin of the quotation (for example, I would note “Liz, interview 1, page 15”).

When all nine interviews had been transcribed, read over several times, and highlighted according to themes and ideas, I started the thematic analysis. Once I had colour coded the transcripts according to key terms and themes, I was able to group these findings based on theme. These groupings of quotations became the basis of a thematic analysis and a summary of the most commonly occurring responses and key ideas. I created a Word document for one particular theme, such as “workload”, and copied all comments pertaining to workload into this separate document. I continued to do this for all ideas/themes that appeared regularly in transcripts. This method meant that I had a document for each idea/theme with a range of notes and quotations. I used these theme-based documents to brainstorm and reflect on how the comments may relate, and what might be the similarities and differences of participant experiences. These theme-based documents, including participant comments and quotes, became the basis of the sections of my findings chapters (see Chapters Five, Six and Seven).

The interviews were analysed using an inductive coding approach, allowing themes to be revealed from participants' views and experiences. This approach was designed to acknowledge the experiences of the individuals in these roles rather than deducing themes around my preexisting experiences and assumptions in the sector. Thematic analysis allows findings from the chosen methods (the survey open questions and case studies) to be discussed and analysed thematically, and links drawn across the methods—otherwise known as a triangulation (Yin, 2016). I aimed to identify patterns in what participants said about their experiences. Thematic analysis recognised my active role as researcher in the research process and the generation of findings, otherwise known as personal reflexivity (Braun et al., 2015). Supported by the advice of several methodology authors (Brinkman & Kvale, 2018; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Mutch, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012), I followed a suggested process for recording and transcribing interviews, including leaving margins and spaces within the transcripts for notetaking, colour coding, and keeping a copy of the original transcript (free from notes or highlights). I also followed the six steps of thematic analysis provided by Braun et al. (2015) to code, categorise, analyse, and discuss case study results thematically. These six steps included familiarisation with the data, coding, searching for themes, revising themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up (Braun et al., 2015). These steps were used to find thematic links within the transcript as well as thematic links across all three transcripts.

4.4.6 Display of Data

Once I was familiar with the interview transcripts and the stories being told, findings were grouped into subheadings around themes. I compared the themes within the survey data and case study interviews to those identified in the literature, particularly taking note of any commonalities or surprises. All results were discussed around the framework of my three research questions. It was also important to let participant voice be a prominent feature of this research; therefore, participant quotes are used at the start of chapters—in epigraphs—as well as throughout the thesis to illustrate themes or explain ideas in more specific detail. It was important to realise that in using this method, not all participant quotes could be used, and I needed to decide which quotes illustrated which themes the most effectively.

4.5 Relational Agency as a Theoretical Lens: Data Analysis

Relational agency served as a key theoretical lens for this research, guiding the analysis of survey and case study data. During coding, particular attention was paid to any references to relationships within the SENCO role, including the use of the skills and knowledge of others. Data were coded with this lens in mind with all mentions of “relationships” or related terms highlighted and recorded in a separate document, alongside relevant quotes and notes. The focus was not only on the types of relationships SENCOs form and maintain but also on how these relationships are established as well as the factors that enable or constrain them. References to “agency” within the role, such as supports or barriers affecting SENCOs’ ability to create outcomes, were also captured in this document. Once the data were compiled, two key aspects of relational agency were examined:

1. The individuals or groups with whom SENCOs build relational agency and the processes by which this occurs; and
2. The enactment of agency, including the constraints and enablers that influence agency.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical research practice was fundamental to this study, particularly in light of the relational nature of the research and the extended engagement with participants. Working closely with a small number of participants over time required ongoing attention to trustworthiness and dependability, alongside a commitment to safeguarding anonymity, maintaining confidentiality, and thoughtfully managing the transition at the conclusion of the research. For ethical considerations, I followed the guidelines of the University of Waikato Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations (University of Waikato, 2008). Below, I detail how I addressed these ethical considerations.

1. **Informed consent.** All participants were given a participant information sheet. After having any questions answered, if individuals agreed to participate in

this research, they were given a consent form to sign. Brenner (2006) also reminds the researcher that it is important to include options on the consent form so the participant can give or withhold consent for each of the levels of participation—in my case, this would be interviews, recording, and transcribing of interviews. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions at any time throughout the research. Consent also included the right to withdraw from the study up until the time of approval of the final transcript.

2. **Privacy.** Participants' privacy was respected, and steps were taken to protect anonymity. For the case study, at no point was identifying information used, and pseudonyms for participants and schools were used throughout the study. Participants were informed of the collected data, how it would be reported, and steps taken to protect anonymity.

3. **Accuracy of data.** Participants were given opportunities to check all interview transcripts and amend or modify them. I sent transcripts to interviewees within one month of our interview. Participants were given another month to check these and modify with corrections or deletions if needed. Once the changes had been made, a modified transcript was then sent back to participants for checking. For this study, very few changes were requested by participants.

4. **Respect.** Respect for the participant is essential. The three participants in this case study gave a significant amount of their time to this study over a year, including three interviews and checking transcripts. For one participant, the time taken for the interviews, correspondence, and checking of transcripts equated to approximately 40 hours. It was important to plan how I would exit this study and how to thank the participants for their contribution. Yin (2016) states that it is just as important to plan how to exit the field as it is to plan how to enter. After my study and the initial write up of my completed thesis, I visited all three participants to share my findings with them, orally and in writing. I answered any questions and thanked them for their contribution. I reassured participants of their anonymity and shared how these findings may be used or shared, or how this study may be used to inform principals

and the Ministry of Education. This was also an important opportunity to check in to see how involvement in the research study had impacted participants. These findings are shared later in the Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations chapter, Chapter Eight.

5. **Wellbeing.** Participant wellbeing was a key consideration. The primary risk in this study was potential emotional distress arising from sensitive questioning. Farrimond (2013) and Wiles (2013) emphasise the importance of researcher sensitivity to participants' emotions, including monitoring body language for signs of fatigue or discomfort and responding appropriately. Wiles (2013) further notes that participants should leave interviews no more distressed than when they began. Debriefing was therefore an essential strategy, both to support participant wellbeing and to assess responses in order to plan subsequent steps (Farrimond, 2013).

4.6.1 Researcher's Role in Interviews

Within the constructivist paradigm, I needed to acknowledge my active role as a researcher within this study. Gaining the respect of participants and building mutual trust were key considerations, and entry and exit planning considerations were also crucial. I acknowledge my role as an insider-researcher in this study: working in the same field (secondary schooling) as the participants as well as sharing common knowledge and experiences (Bukamal, 2022). My role as an insider-researcher potentially brought challenges in the form of assumptions based on my experiences as well as a shared understanding with participants of aspects of the role and the workings of secondary schools (Bukamal, 2022). My role as insider-researcher was both helpful, in terms of common experiences and trustworthiness, and yet somewhat a liability as I held mutual knowledge and assumptions with my participants, stemming from our collective experience working in secondary schools. To deal with this, I shared transcripts with my supervisors, who were both outside secondary schooling. As neutral observers, my supervisors were able to question assumptions I may have made in the questioning process as well as identifying any information that may need further clarification or questioning. Having a neutral third party

check the transcripts was also an important tool in terms of credibility to identify any information or observations I may have missed.

4.6.2 Trustworthiness

Guba's (1981) pioneering work on trustworthiness within qualitative research identifies four key components of trustworthiness, which are expanded in Shenton's (2004) research. Ensuring trustworthiness is a fundamental aspect of qualitative research, underpinning the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of findings (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2024). In this study, careful attention was paid to each component to ensure that the perspectives of participants were authentically represented and that the research process was transparent and rigorous, as fitting with qualitative research methods.

Credibility was addressed through a combination of methodological choices, prolonged engagement, triangulation, and reflective practices (Shenton, 2024). The selection of case study and survey methods provided complementary forms of data that enhanced understanding of the SENCO experiences. Prolonged engagement was achieved through multiple interviews with each participant over a nine-month period, allowing trust and familiarity to develop and facilitating a deeper, richer understanding of participants' contexts and perspectives. Triangulation between survey responses and case study data strengthened confidence in the findings, while peer scrutiny by supervisors offered challenges to my assumptions and interpretations (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2024). My position as an insider-researcher, with over twenty years' experience in secondary education, further contributed to credibility, enabling shared understanding with participants while necessitating my own reflexive awareness to minimise bias. Member checking—sending interview transcripts to participants for feedback—ensured that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences (Shenton, 2024).

Transferability was considered through rich detail of the research setting. I provided the context, participant recruitment processes, and participant profiles, to allow readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Limitations were

noted and mentioned throughout the study.

Dependability was enhanced through transparent reporting of research processes. Detailed documentation of participant selection, recruitment, methodological decisions, and the coding and analysis procedures provides an audit trail that other researchers could follow to replicate or extend the study. This attention to transparency of methods aligns with Shenton's (2004) recommendations for establishing dependability.

Confirmability was addressed through strategies that prioritised participants' voices while acknowledging the researcher's influence, including assumptions, prior experiences, and role as an insider-researcher. An audit trail documenting key decisions, coding strategies, and analytical procedures further supports confirmability, offering a clear account of how findings were derived from the data rather than researcher bias.

Collectively, these measures ensured that the study maintained a high standard of qualitative rigor, providing trustworthy and ethically sound insights into the experiences of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools.

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter, Chapter Four, sets out the methodology to examine the experiences and perceptions of SENCO individuals working in New Zealand secondary schools. I detailed a constructivist paradigm and justified the use of qualitative research methods. I also explored the advantages of the two chosen methods: survey and case studies (incorporating semistructured interviews) for capturing the experiences and voices of SENCOs working in our secondary schools. The theoretical and methodological choices outlined in this chapter were selected to create a stocktake of SENCOs in the central North Island region and gain rich, in-depth data about the realities of being a SENCO. This chapter has detailed sampling methods and ethical considerations. The experiences and views of experienced researchers have helped to inform and drive the chosen methodology and methodological decisions for this research study. The next three chapters, Chapters Five, Six, and Seven, present the findings of the two stages of this research design. Chapter Five examines the findings of

Stage One, the online electronic survey, and Chapters Six and Seven present the findings of the case studies.

Chapter Five: Who are the SENCOs in New Zealand Secondary Schools? An Analysis of Survey Results

I think most schools have a SENCO. Do they? I mean, I really should know this. Surely you would think there would be a register of SENCOs, and we could contact each other and organise meetups etc.? But I guess that's the issue—we're all working in isolation with no idea how many of us are out there or what we're all doing.

—Kim, case study participant, November 2020

This chapter is the first of three chapters presenting the findings of this research study. This chapter focuses solely on Stage One—the analysis of the online electronic survey sent to SENCOs in the central North Island region of New Zealand. The first stage of the research was a survey designed to create a stocktake of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools. Of the 57 secondary schools I contacted and sent an electronic survey, 17 responses from SENCOs at individual schools were received. The aim was to gain demographic and other information about the SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools, which, as explained in the Introduction chapter (Chapter One) is not information currently kept by the Ministry of Education (MOE). The other purpose of the survey was to refine the interview questions for Stage Two of the research study—the case studies.

This chapter, Chapter Five, presents the data that emerged from this sample of SENCOs in the North Island of New Zealand to contribute to an answer to the first research question. I begin by using the survey findings to present demographic information about the participants, including their qualifications, prior experience, and perceptions of preparedness for the SENCO role (Section 5.1). This is followed by an analysis of survey responses describing how the SENCO role operates in practice (Section 5.2). Section 5.3 examines the types of support available to SENCOs, while Section 5.4 explores the current challenges they face. Section 5.5 then discusses participants' responses regarding job satisfaction and motivation. The chapter concludes by identifying areas for further exploration in the case study interviews, informed by the analysis of the survey data.

Kim's quote in the epigraph demonstrates my motivation for the choice of this electronic survey: to rectify the apparent lack of information regarding SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools. This chapter goes some way towards providing an examination of SENCOs working in New Zealand secondary schools to inform the MOE, principals, and other SENCOs.

5.1 Survey Respondent Demographics: Age, Gender, and Experience

This section uses survey findings to contribute some information towards the question of who the SENCOs are in New Zealand secondary schools. The demographics section (six questions within the survey) asked about respondents' age and gender, experience/training/qualifications, and career history. To protect the identity of survey respondents, each individual SENCO respondent has been allocated a respondent number, which is used throughout the thesis. Table 4 records demographic information (gender, age, and number of years in the SENCO role) for each survey respondent.

Table 3:
Demographics of Survey Respondents

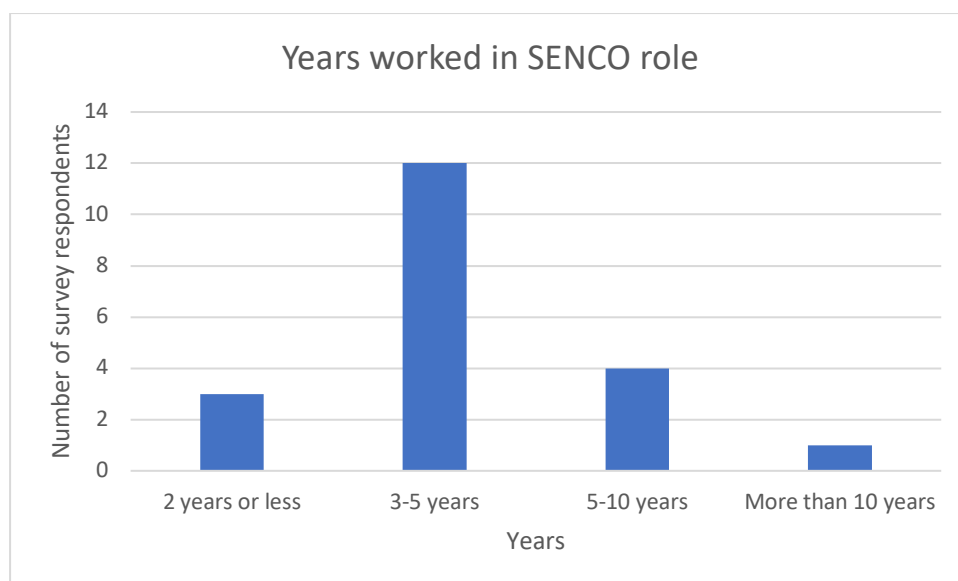
Survey respondent number	Gender (F/M/prefer not to say)	Age	Number of years working in education	Number of years in SENCO role
1	F	42	10–15	3
2	F	62	15+	11
3	F	61	15+	6
4	Prefer not to say	54	10–15	2
5	F	58	15+	8
6	F	52	15+	7
7	F	64	10–15	4
8	F	62	10–15	5
9	F	68	15+	7
10	F	63	10–15	3
11	F	52	10–15	3
12	F	56	15+	8
13	F	47	10–15	3
14	F	51	10–15	4
15	F	55	15+	5
16	F	61	15+	7
17	F	34	10–15	1

Of the 17 respondents, 16 identified as female. One respondent chose not to answer this question. It can therefore be inferred that those who hold positions for inclusive education in New Zealand secondary schools who responded to the survey are predominantly female. Although there was some variability in the age of respondents and length of time in the education sector, the responses indicated the substantial experience these professionals bring to their roles. Most respondents (16/17) were 40 years old or older, with 14 over 50. Only one respondent was younger than 40. All 17 respondents indicated they had worked in the education sector for ten years or more. Approximately half the respondents had worked in the education sector for 10–15 years, and the other half of respondents indicated they had worked in the education sector for 15 years or more. To compare this level of experience to all secondary teachers in New Zealand, I found that 75% of secondary teachers have worked in the education sector more than seven years, while only 67% of secondary teachers have worked in education for ten years or more (Teaching Council, 2023). Therefore, it does appear that SENCOs have more experience in the education sector than general teachers, on average.

Figure 3 displays the number of years worked in the SENCO role based on survey respondents. The majority of respondents (more than half) had been in the SENCO role for between three and five years. Only three respondents had been in the role for two years or less. Approximately one third of respondents had been in the role between five and ten years. Only one respondent had been in the SENCO role for more than 10 years. These findings do indicate potentially high turnover in the SENCO role, which is explored in more detail throughout this thesis.

Figure 3:

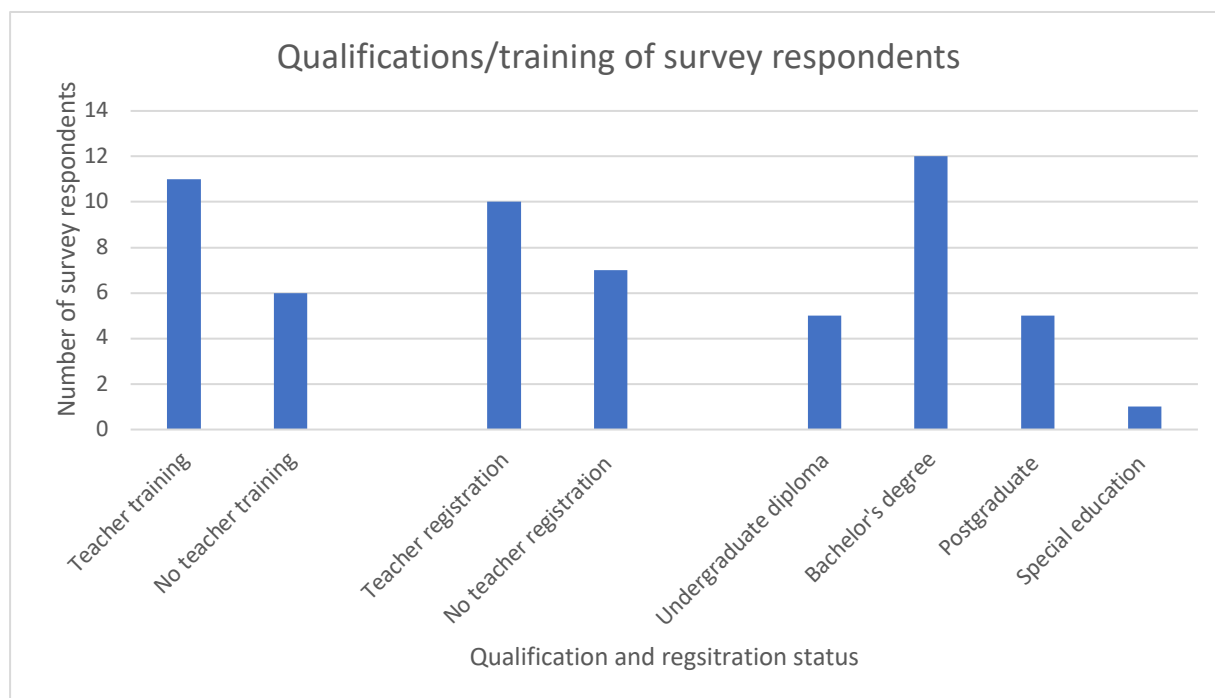
The Number of Years Survey Respondents Reported as Working in the SENCO Role



5.1.1 Qualifications and Training

Respondents were asked to indicate their qualifications and training before taking on their current role (see Appendix A questions 4 & 5) with responses indicating various qualifications. As seen in Figure 5, two thirds of respondents held specific teaching qualifications (either a Bachelor of Teaching or a Postgraduate Diploma of Teaching) while one third of respondents did not hold a specific teaching qualification. Just over half of respondents was currently registered as teachers with the New Zealand Teachers Council. Therefore, just under half of respondents did not hold a current New Zealand teacher registration certificate and were not currently registered teachers. I found this a surprising finding, particularly given the fact that all SENCOs in England must be qualified and registered teachers (Tissot, 2013). I would examine teacher registration further in the case study interviews.

Figure 4:
Qualifications and Registration Status of Survey Respondents



Only one respondent held a formal qualification in inclusive education: a postgraduate certificate. Of the remaining respondents, most (15/17) stated that they had participated in short courses (1–3 days), online learning, conferences, and/or MOE-organised professional development days, all specialising in inclusive education. Respondents also noted in-service qualifications they had gained while working as a SENCO, including short-course, online training from universities in autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The most common response when asked about preparedness was “learning on the job” (16 out of 17 respondents).

Respondents to my survey held a wide array of prior training and qualifications, not just in education (see Appendix A, questions 5, 6, & 9). Just over two thirds of respondents held bachelor's degrees in either education, teaching, psychology, or the arts. Almost one third of respondents held undergraduate certificates, most commonly in early childhood education. Another one third of respondents held postgraduate qualifications in various specialities, including teaching, education, psychology, and management. Two respondents held

master's qualifications in education. One respondent had a Diploma in Social Work. The wide variety of experience/qualifications could indicate what school employers judge as relevant and appropriate to the SENCO role. Therefore, backgrounds in support work (including mental health and social work) and teaching at any year level may be viewed as valuable skills for the SENCO role.

5.1.2 Career Pathways

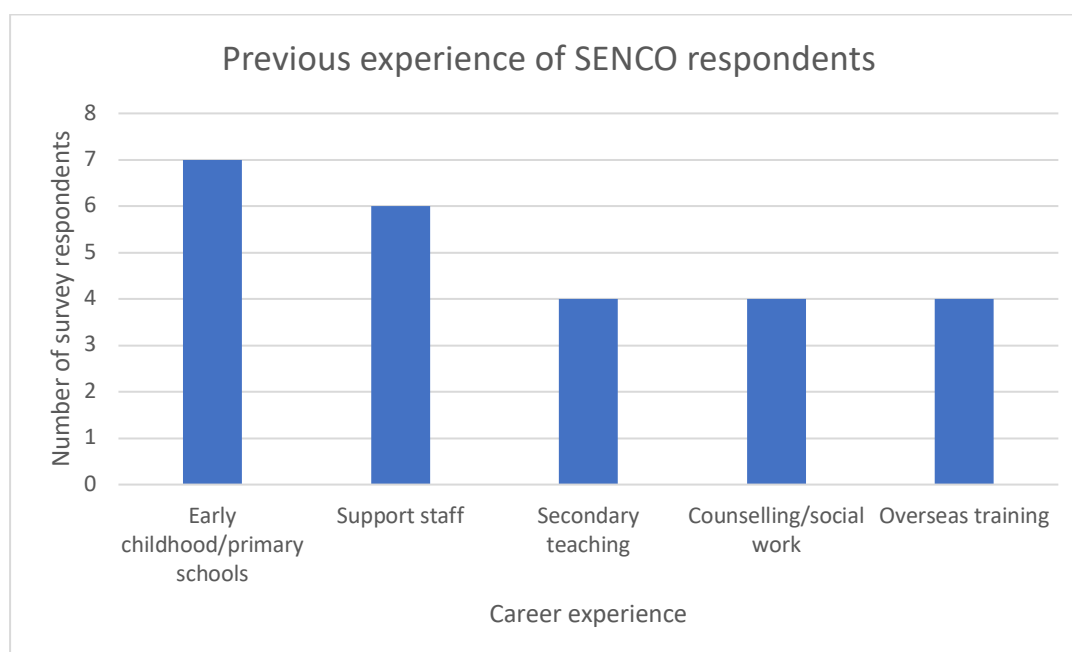
Survey responses indicated a variety of career pathways prior to working in the role of a SENCO, including international work experience. Four respondents had completed training overseas before taking on their current role. Three of these respondents indicated that this experience was in the inclusive education sector in the UK, and one respondent held a degree and teaching diploma from England. Another four respondents had previously held positions as teachers and in middle management positions (deans, heads of departments) in secondary schools before moving to the SENCO role. There did not seem to be any pattern of subject speciality here with respondents stating they held middle management positions from subject specialities like English, science, the social sciences, and music.

I was particularly interested in the experience and qualifications of the respondents who were not currently registered teachers. These six individuals held experience in support staff roles, including literacy support and teacher aide work. Of particular interest was the number of respondents (almost one third) from counselling and social work backgrounds. This raises the question of whether skills gained in care-related roles, such as empathy and understanding individual needs, might be considered part of the preparation and suitability for the SENCO role, potentially holding equal value to teaching experience or registration. I will explore this finding more within the case study interviews.

Notably, almost half of the responding secondary-school SENCOs had experience working in the early childhood or primary school sectors (see Figure 5). Respondents stated that they believed their prior experiences in the early childhood/primary sectors was crucial in preparing them for the SENCO role. One respondent (respondent 7) said, "I am so fortunate that I have a background in early childhood, which has adequately prepared me for this role." This respondent was not alone in appreciation of the advantage of having experience

with younger children. Another survey respondent (respondent 4) commented, “my primary training has been crucial in preparing me for this role so that I have an understanding of the basic literacy and mathematics progressions [from the MOE].” These comments indicated the value these respondents saw in having experience with younger children, but there was room for more detail on how this experience advantaged them. I considered this particularly pertinent to this study as it can be assumed that many students with additional learning needs are delayed in school achievement for their age. Therefore, this emphasis on knowledge of younger students also became a topic to explore further in the case studies.

Figure 5:
Survey Respondents' Work Experience Prior to the SENCO Role



5.2 The SENCO Role in Practice

This section (Section 5.2) uses ratings and comments from survey respondents to understand aspects of the SENCO role in practice. Survey respondents were asked to comment on role titles, time allocation, role responsibilities, key words to describe the role, flexibility, support, and challenges of the role in practice. This section explores survey respondent answers to these questions to begin to understand the practical aspects of the SENCO role and how it functions on a day-to-day basis.

5.2.1 Title, Time, and Responsibilities

Although “SENCO” is widely adopted as a role title, it is not used by every New Zealand secondary school. Three quarters of respondents stated that their role title was SENCO. However, almost one quarter of respondents identified with different titles for their roles, including “learning support teacher.” One respondent was given the title “learning support unit leader” due to their management of the inclusive education department within the school and in acknowledgement of the fact that they manage a team of teacher aides. Two respondents stated that they were concurrently filling both the SENCO and learning support coordinator roles. I determined to explore these concurrent roles in more depth later within the case studies.

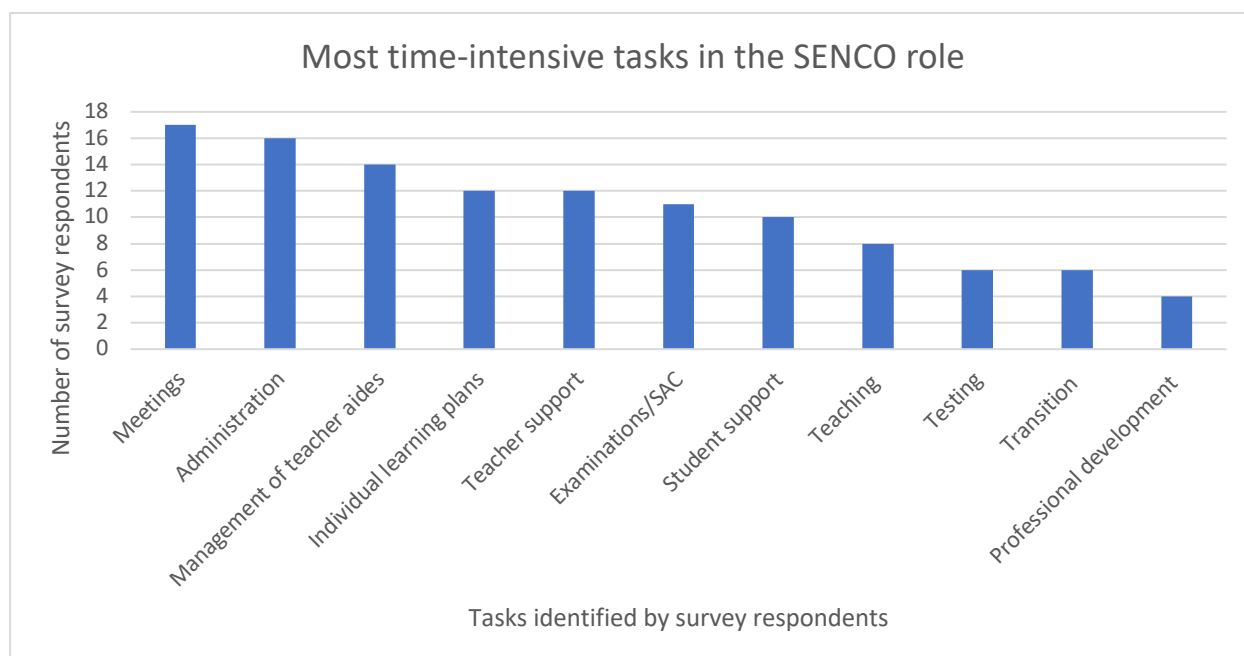
In New Zealand secondary schools, most individuals in SENCO roles are not full time (Storer, 2002). In my survey, just under half of respondents (8/17) stated that their position was “full time” (1.0 full-time equivalent [FTE]); however, this employment included other roles/responsibilities for these people, such as teacher aide work, teaching, senior management roles, library management, dean roles, sports coaching/managing, and pastoral duties. Four respondent SENCOs listed their role as full time with no other paid responsibilities. One third of respondents listed the hours of employment for the SENCO role as “part time” (less than 20 hours per week). Interpreting this data, it appears that very few individuals—less than one quarter of my respondents—have roles solely focused on SENCO work and, therefore, often must balance their time with other roles and responsibilities.

Almost unanimously, respondents noted that they regularly exceeded the hours specified in their contracts. One survey response was particularly notable (respondent 16): “My role is officially 15 hours per week, and that’s what I’m paid for. But I’m here at least 60 hours a week just getting it all done. How on earth they expect me to get it all done within 15 hours is beyond me!” The quote suggests that fulfilling the SENCO role commonly involves working additional hours not covered by their contract. Based on these survey responses, I developed specific questions to use in the case study interviews relating to hours of employment and additional responsibilities (see Appendix B).

Respondents were asked to list up to five tasks that occupied the most time in the SENCO role (see Appendix A). Tasks commonly identified by SENCO respondents are displayed graphically in Figure 6. Administration and meetings were consistently listed as the most time-intensive responsibilities, being identified by at least 16/17 respondents. Other tasks that were commonly identified by SENCO respondents as being time intensive included management of teacher aides, individual learning plans, teacher support, and examinations/special assessment conditions (SAC). Professional development was the lowest-ranked task, suggesting it occupies little time within the SENCO role.

Figure 6:

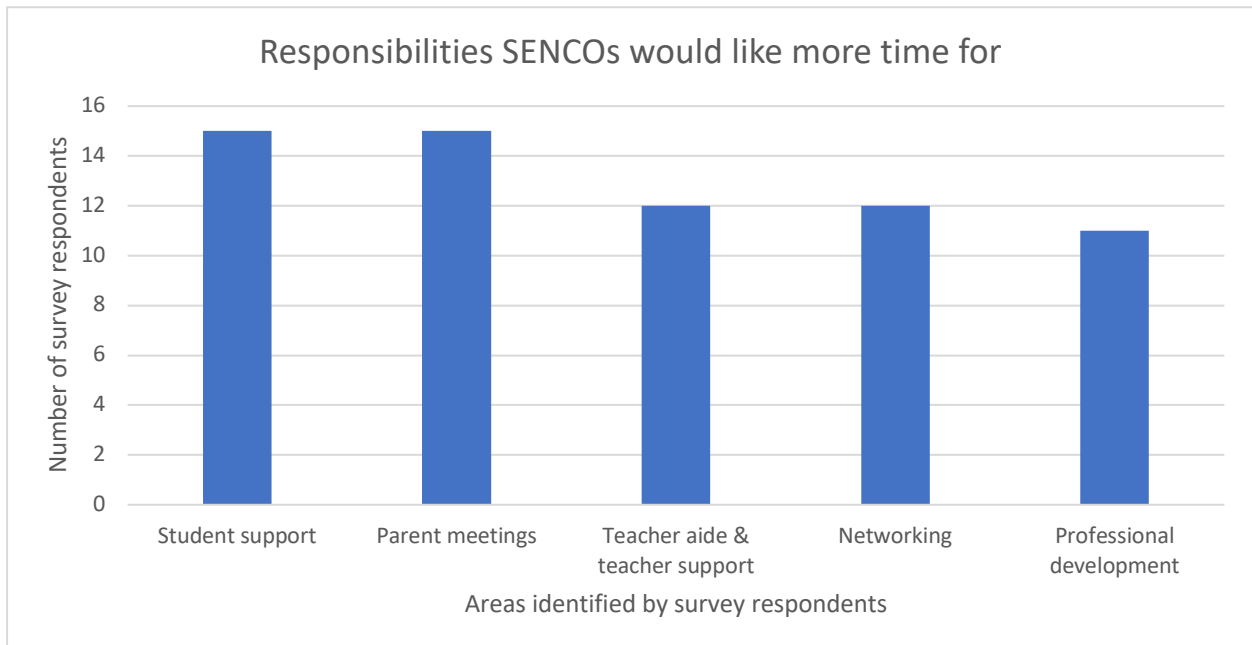
Most Time-intensive Tasks in the SENCO Role as Reported by Survey Respondents



The findings highlight a mismatch between the time SENCOs spend on various tasks and the time they wish they could devote to key aspects of their role. Figure 6 illustrates the tasks that SENCO respondents wished they had more time to complete. When asked which duties or responsibilities they wanted additional time for, more than three quarters identified working directly with students, meeting with parents/whānau, collaborating with teacher aides and teachers, and networking with other educational professionals. Although Figure 6 shows that professional development ranked among the least time-intensive tasks, Figure 7 reveals that two thirds of respondents still wished for more time for professional learning to

better support their roles.

Figure 7:
Responsibilities SENCOs Would Like More Time For



5.2.2 Key Words to Describe the Role

To gain a snapshot of SENCO experiences of the role, I asked survey respondents to select five keywords to describe the SENCO role. Responses provided by respondents fell into two categories: tasks associated with the SENCO role and the role's emotional aspects. For task-based responses, the most common responses included relationships (13 mentions), administration (12), time management (10), and meetings (9). The words used to describe the tasks in the SENCO role are displayed graphically in Figure 8.

Figure 8:

Key Words Survey Respondents Used to Describe the Tasks of the SENCO Role

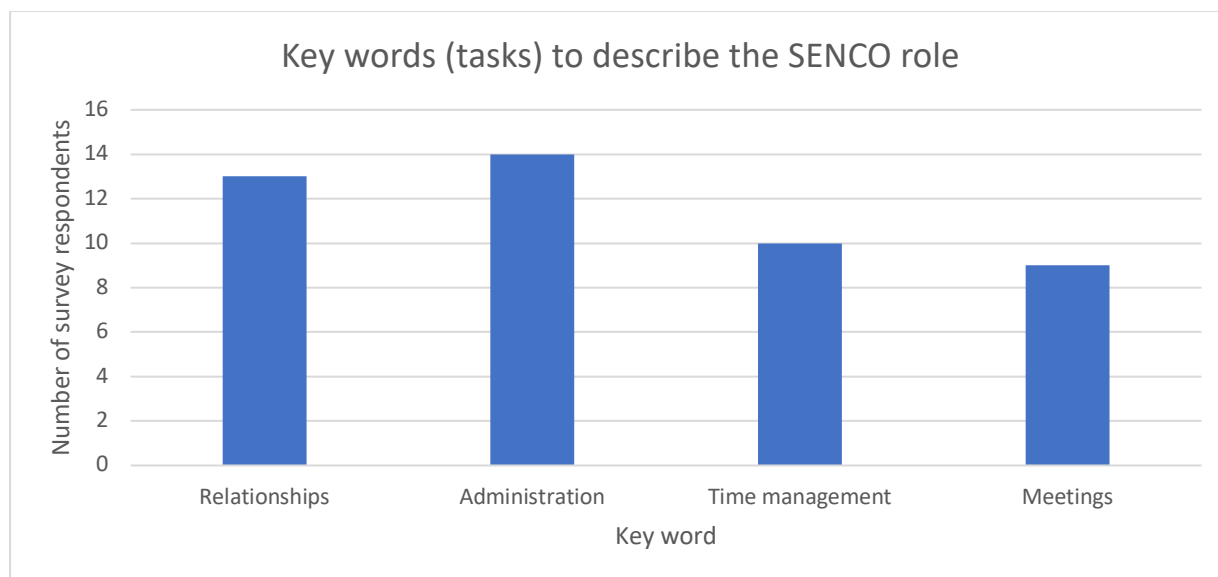
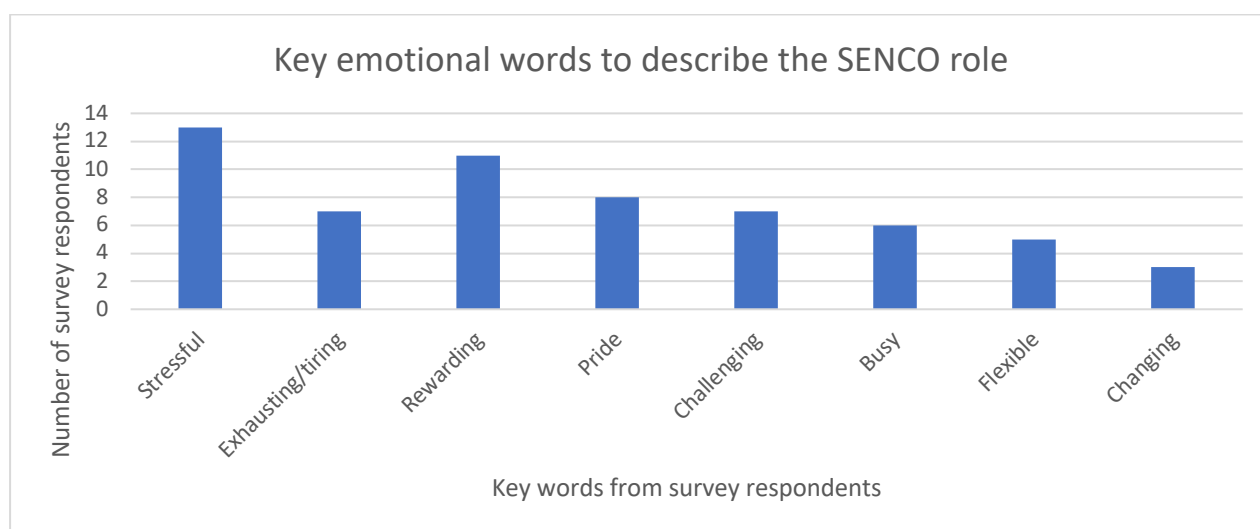


Figure 9 displays the keywords survey provided that indicated emotional aspects of the role. Each participant was asked to give three words to describe the role. The most frequent responses were “stressful” or some version of the word stress (13) and rewarding (11).

Similarly, “exhausting/tiring,” “pride,” and “challenging” have a similar frequency of mentions, suggesting the “negative” connotations of the role are mentioned as often as the “positive” or rewarding connotations of the role.

Figure 9:

Key Emotional Words to Describe the SENCO Role



5.2.3 Flexibility as a Possible Limitation

Although there was a high degree of variability in hours of employment and role titles, SENCO respondents frequently commented on the high degree of flexibility in the SENCO role throughout survey comments. However, not all respondents were comfortable with this level of flexibility. On a 10-point scale, all 17 participants rated the level of flexibility in the SENCO role (see Appendix A question 15) between 8–10 (*completely flexible*). Responses to this question suggest that SENCOs can choose how they structure their day and which tasks they prioritise. When asked how comfortable SENCOs felt with this level of flexibility, using another ten-point scale (see Appendix A, question 16), the results ranged from one (*not comfortable at all*) to ten (*completely comfortable*) with an average rating of 3.2. Just over one half of the respondents felt very uncomfortable with the level of flexibility (ratings of 1–3) despite the flexibility they experienced. Comments from survey respondents suggest that the high level of flexibility is associated with unpredictability and lack of guidance from school management. These survey respondents would prefer a higher level of support and more regular guidance within their role. One quarter of respondents who were *completely comfortable* with a high level of flexibility in their role commented on the “freedom” to make the role their own. The discrepancy in these responses regarding participants’ apparent feelings about the level of flexibility in their role indicated another topic to be developed during the case study interviews.

5.3 Support Within the SENCO Role

This section (Section 5.4) unpacks the level of support SENCOs reported they receive within the school and the external individuals/organisations that support SENCO participants in their role.

5.3.1 Internal School Support

Meeting arrangements illustrated the variance in practice and the discretion schools have when managing a SENCO position. Many respondents (almost two thirds) had no regular fixed ongoing arrangements for meetings. These respondents stated that meetings varied from once a month to once a term with a senior leadership team (SLT) member. One third

of respondents said that they meet weekly with a supervisor, who, in each case, was a member of the school's senior management. Only two respondents indicated that their role was included in the school's SLT and that they were involved in regular leadership meetings. Most commonly, respondents mentioned that their support person in the SLT was either the principal or a deputy/assistant principal with responsibility for diverse learning needs. Therefore, these respondents had more contact with their supervisor than the scheduled leadership meetings.

In contrast, three respondents stated that they only meet with a senior leader once a year, and two said there are no fixed and ongoing arrangements to report or meet. They are left to action the role independently. Variance in expected meeting frequency (from once a week to none at all) indicates the flexibility school leaders have to manage this SENCO role. Meeting arrangements appear to be at the school management's discretion.

Those respondents who were meeting regularly with a SLT member indicated that they felt more comfortable than those who were meeting less frequently with a manager. The respondents who had regular meetings with their senior managers (at least once a month) indicated a high comfort level with the flexibility of their role (ratings of 8–10). In contrast, those respondents who were only meeting with their senior managers once a year or not at all indicated low comfort levels with the flexibility of their roles (ratings of 2–4). These ratings suggest that SENCOs may feel more comfortable with more regular meetings with a senior team member. The frequency of meeting arrangements was added to be further explored in case study interviews.

5.3.2 External Support

The majority of respondents (14/17) noted that education professionals in other schools support them in the SENCO role. Respondents indicated these professional relationships of support included SENCOs in other schools (half of respondents), teaching staff members in other schools (6 respondents), RTLBs (5 respondents), and other professionals in related fields (including health professionals). There did not appear to be a wealth of nationwide support systems for SENCOs or MOE-driven support accessed by survey respondents with

only two respondents listing online support networks of SENCOs and Ministry-organised SENCO training days as sources of support. Respondent 14 referred to an online “hub” that provided SENCOs with chat forums and online resources. Respondent 3 referred to annual SENCO professional development days, organised by the MOE, in which SENCOs from around the region would come together to share and learn. Two respondents stated that they accessed no formal sources of support from outside their school in their SENCO role. This information suggests that most SENCOs seek external support from education professionals to help them fulfil their role, predominantly finding support from teaching staff and SENCOs from other schools. This also suggests that it could be up to the individual SENCO to form and maintain these professional relationships rather than relying on MOE-provided support systems.

5.3.3 Feelings of Preparedness

Acknowledging the many pathways towards the SENCO role and the varying degrees of internal and external support available, it was interesting to note feelings of preparedness when taking on this role. Respondents were asked to indicate “how prepared they felt to carry out the SENCO role” (see Appendix A, question 9), asking respondents to indicate their feelings of preparedness on a 10-point scale. There was no clear consensus in the findings. One third of respondents felt *extremely prepared* (ratings of 8–10), another third of respondents felt *adequately prepared* (ratings of 5–7), and the final third of respondents selected *not prepared* (ratings of 2–4). When comparing participants’ responses with their qualifications and time in education, there was no indication that higher qualifications and longer lengths of time in the education sector led to greater feelings of preparedness. Similarly, it is difficult to identify whether participants’ levels of preparedness were influenced by school contexts or potentially reflected individuals’ feelings on the day of completing the survey. Feelings of preparedness also became a subject for further exploration in the case study interviews.

5.4 Current Challenges

When asked about the challenges of the role, the most common responses included workload/administration, meetings, time pressures, and not having enough time to do all

aspects of the role. For example, one participant (respondent 8) commented, “This role never ends. The paperwork, meetings, administration just goes on and on. There’s never enough time in the week to meet all the demands of this job.”

Other responses included challenges with senior management and not feeling supported in the role. Three quotes from respondents illustrate these challenges. One SENCO (respondent 9) stated, “It’s really difficult to do this role when you don’t feel respected or valued by management. I’m not sure they truly understand the value of what I do.” Reporting on similar feelings of not feeling valued, respondent 6 commented, “It’s a super tough role, made extra tough when you don’t get respect or support or proper training. I’ve been left on my own to work out what the heck I’m supposed to be doing.” Another respondent (respondent 13) indicated similar challenges with not feeling valued by management: “I would love this role if my senior leadership team valued me.” All three quotes highlight that these respondents did not feel valued or supported by those in leadership positions who had recruited them. I considered it very important to explore the SENCO relationship with management in the school through the case studies to come.

5.4.1 Changes to the SENCO Role

Responses to the survey suggested that SENCOs perceive an increase in the complexity and diversity of additional learning needs. When asked to comment on changes in the role over time (see Appendix A, question 25), almost one half of respondents commented on an observed increase in students with diverse educational needs and the increasing diversity and complexity of these needs. Respondent 14 summarised this by stating, “my [student] numbers keep increasing, and the complexity of the needs keeps increasing. I feel like every week there’s a new terminology or diagnosis, and I constantly need to keep upskilling.” Respondent 2 indicated similar concerns, supporting her claims with a rise in student numbers: “In my first year at this school, I had 20 students. Now, I have 80 with the same hours per week. Numbers of students with special needs are going through the roof, and I cannot keep up.” Respondent comments suggest that the needs of schools are increasing (in terms of the number of students and complexity of needs), despite no increase in SENCO contracted hours at these schools.

At the time of this survey (2019), the new MOE-funded learning support coordinator (LSC) positions had been in place for eighteen months. When questioned about changes in the SENCO role during their time in the position (see Appendix A, question 25), three quarters of respondents commented on the recently introduced LSC role and how it has changed their sense of their position and purpose. Although the intentions of this role were for the LSCs to work alongside SENCOs, survey respondents revealed that the introduction of this role had left respondents feeling unclear about role boundaries with aspects of the SENCO role now seemingly being covered by the new LSC position. Respondent 2 commented on the LSC role's impact, stating: "the LSC has completely transformed my role and my main tasks. I've had to completely relook at what I do and how I do it." Similarly, respondent 1 commented "I don't know what the point of my role is now. Our LSC seems to have taken over all of my jobs." This loss of sense of what the SENCO valued was seen in a third respondent (respondent 11): "The LSC is now doing all the things I loved about my job." Similar comments were made by other respondents, noting that LSCs have assumed duties that were once part of the SENCO role. This has left some respondents questioning the clarity of boundaries between the two positions and other respondents feeling that the aspects they enjoyed in the role have now been displaced.

5.5 Job Satisfaction and Motivation

When designing this survey, I was particularly interested in what motivates individuals to fulfil a SENCO role. The final section of the survey included an opportunity for respondents to explain why they choose to do this role and the aspects of the role that give SENCO respondents the greatest sense of job satisfaction (see Appendix A, questions 23 and 26). Survey participants were asked to rate their sense of job satisfaction in the SENCO role using a 10-point scale. Figure 10 visually displays survey respondents' sense of job satisfaction in the SENCO role.

Figure 10:
Survey Respondents' Level of SENCO Job Satisfaction

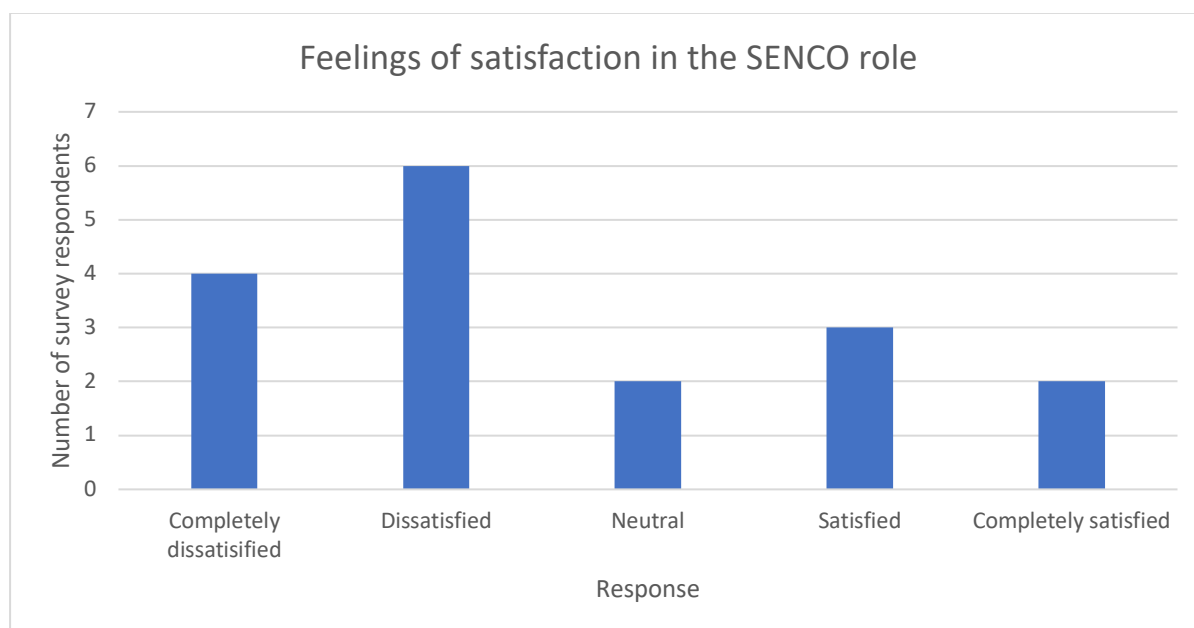


Figure 10 suggests that SENCOs are mostly dissatisfied with their roles. This Figure highlights that most survey respondents (just over half) were dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied with the SENCO role. Within this group, almost one quarter of respondents were *completely dissatisfied* with the SENCO role. Only two respondents were *completely satisfied* in their roles, suggesting that most SENCOs in the North Island secondary schools that responded to the survey are somewhat dissatisfied with their roles.

Comments from SENCO respondents feeling dissatisfied centre around time pressures, administration and overall workload, and lack of support from management, and they provide a strong sense that the role cannot be adequately achieved within their contract hours. Seven respondents commented on not enough time or too much to do within the time constraints. Respondents 12 and 16 commented on not being valued or supported by school management when explaining their low job satisfaction rating. Respondent 3 believed they were “invisible,” suggesting the SENCO does not feel valued or acknowledged by management. These comments indicate that time pressures and recognition from management are perhaps two of the key issues for SENCOs. To better understand the factors influencing job satisfaction, this topic became a key focus in the case study interviews.

Those respondents who had a high level of job satisfaction often mentioned that although the job was hard, it was “rewarding,” and they felt like they were making a “difference.” The responses can be highlighted in the quote from one respondent: “It’s worth all the hard work to see the results from these kids” (respondent 6). Nearly all respondents expressed that working closely with these students and witnessing their small improvements were the primary motivations for fulfilling the SENCO role. Comments included: “the absolute joy of seeing the improvement these kids make” (respondent 1); “knowing I’m making a difference” (respondent 6); and “the little steps students make in their learning that help me remember why I’m doing what I do” (respondent 11). From these comments, it can be inferred that high levels of job satisfaction were related to rewards and a perception that individuals were making a difference.

5.6 Chapter Summary

The survey was designed as the first stage in contributing an answer to the first request question: “What are the characteristics of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools?” To summarise, according to survey responses, SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools are predominantly female and highly experienced educators—all respondents held at least ten years of experience in the education sector. However, most respondents had been in the SENCO position for less than five years, suggesting there is possibly a high rate of turnover in this role. Although the career backgrounds were diverse, most respondents had some level of formal qualification within the education field and work experience relating to the inclusive education sector, such as psychology, social work, or counselling. Interestingly, almost one half of respondents held background experience in the early childhood and primary school sectors. Just over half of respondents held teacher training qualifications and New Zealand teacher registration with the remaining respondents not currently qualified or registered New Zealand teachers. What these respondents seem to have in common is experience in relational professions or roles that involve caring for others, including children. The variety of responses to the survey questions reinforced the notion that there is no one pathway towards being a SENCO in New Zealand and that no specific training or

qualification is required for a SENCO position.

Survey respondents provided insight into the SENCO role in practice in New Zealand secondary schools. Survey results highlighted the variability of employment hours for SENCOs in New Zealand schools: only one quarter of respondents held their position full time while almost all SENCOs concurrently held other positions of responsibility within their schools. SENCOs recorded that the role's challenges are time pressures and administration. Respondents suggested that achieving all aspects of the role within their contracted hours of employment is very challenging, often requiring them to work well beyond their contracted hours. Almost unanimously, respondents wished they had more time for working with students, teachers, and families.

Survey respondents all indicated a high level of flexibility in the role whereas SENCOs were often uncomfortable with a high level of flexibility and indicated they would prefer more internal support from senior leadership. When asked to reflect on challenges in the role, respondents commented on the apparent increased numbers of students with diverse educational needs and the lack of clarity of boundaries with the new LSC position.

Although levels of job satisfaction varied, more than half of respondents were dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied in their roles. When asked to give reasons for why SENCO respondents choose to do this role, the reward of working with students was frequently mentioned, particularly the sense of satisfaction in seeing students make progress.

Examining the survey data provided guidance on important research topics or questions for Stage Two. Topics identified in the survey data that required further exploration within the case studies included:

- Detail of previous qualifications/experience/background, particularly ECE and primary experience;
- The nature of the contact with the SLT and support provided;
- Details about sense of awareness of support networks for SENCOs and how these are utilised;

- The observed rise in students with diverse educational needs and the apparent rise in complexity of needs;
- Introduction of the LSC position and its impact on the SENCO position; and
- Discussion around the feelings of preparedness to take on the SENCO role and feelings of satisfaction in the role.

The next chapter (Chapter Six) presents the analysis of evidence from Stage Two of the research study: the case studies.

Chapter Six: Case Study Results: The Experiences of SENCOs in New Zealand Secondary Schools

The definition of SENCO is huge. The expectation is that we can fix all cures. You're the miracle person. And we're not. We're just people underneath that are doing the best that we can with not a lot of guidelines there to do it.

—Jane, case study participant, March, 2021

The survey data in the previous chapter (Chapter Five), went some way to answering the question, “What are the characteristics of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools?” The case study interviews were an important opportunity to further unpack the details required to answer this question as well as addressing the other two research questions:

What are the perceptions and experiences of these SENCOs of their roles?

How do these SENCOS engage relational agency to support their work within schools?

Conducting three case studies over the course of nine months provided a sense that the realities of the SENCO role often contrast with the expected responsibilities of the position due, at least in part, to the responsive and variable nature of the role—responding to the daily needs of students. In this chapter, Chapter Six, I use the information provided by case study participants to provide an insight into the day-to-day experiences for SENCOs within New Zealand secondary schools to provide some detail of what this role entails in practice, including the responsibilities of the role, motivation for doing the role, and the current and future challenges.

Each of the three SENCOs participated in three semistructured interviews at different points in the school year (September 2020, November 2020, and March 2021)—a total of nine interviews. Interviews ranged in length from one hour to almost three hours, depending on how much participants wanted to share at each interview point. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this chapter to protect the identity of participants, and all identifying information has been removed. Responses to these semistructured interviews have been analysed and are presented thematically within this chapter. This chapter starts by providing profiles of each of the case study participants (Section 6.1). This chapter then

discusses recruitment to the SENCO role and job descriptions (Section 6.2); responsibilities of the SENCO role enacted, including administrative responsibilities, workload, and availability (Section 6.3); emotional aspects of the role enacted—including guilt, the high expectations of self SENCOs place on themselves, and the emotional toll of the role (Section 6.4); job satisfaction (Section 6.5); and where to next for SENCO participants (Section 6.6).

Jane's quote in the epigraph indicates that there are high expectations placed on the SENCO individual with potentially little guidance from school leaders and other potential support people. By conducting this case study, I hoped to bring to light the roles, responsibilities, and experiences of three individuals fulfilling these roles.

6.1 Participant Profiles

Before presenting case study findings, I considered it important to provide a profile for each SENCO participant to understand their career background, experience, and motivation for choosing the SENCO role. This was to contribute to the first research question, "What are the characteristics of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools?" To honour the time and effort participants gave to this research study, I wanted to highlight the personal experiences, characteristics, and individual working situations for each participant, and also the aspects of the role that gave them satisfaction and those that provided a challenge. The following profiles illustrate that SENCO roles in New Zealand secondary schools are shaped by the context of each school with participants experiencing unique working conditions alongside context-specific successes and challenges.

Given that all participants were based in schools with mid-range socio-economic status, the findings should be interpreted within this context. Previous New Zealand research indicates that socio-economic factors may influence the level and nature of student need, including demand for inclusion support (Ministry of Education, 2024; Education Counts, 2025). As such, the experiences described by participants may not fully reflect those of SENCOs working in schools in lower or higher socio-economic contexts.

6.2.1 Jane

Jane is a highly experienced educator, having worked for over 30 years in schools in New Zealand and internationally. Jane now holds the position of SENCO of a moderate-sized secondary school (approximately 600 students) in the North Island. Jane started her career in early childhood, gaining a Diploma of Early Childhood and working in kindergartens and early childhood centres in several different regions around New Zealand for approximately 20 years. Jane sees her early childhood experience as hugely advantageous to her role as a SENCO: “I think having early childhood experience was a blessing because you actually know where they’ve [the students] come from, in terms of learning, and where they’re going to go.” Jane’s comments suggest that an understanding of early childhood learning, including literacy development, was of benefit to Jane in her context.

Jane spent time teaching English as a second language (ESOL) overseas, which she also considers a valued experience in her SENCO role. From her ESOL experience, Jane believed she gained an in-depth understanding of how learners acquire the basic literacy skills of reading and writing. She commented that she uses this ESOL experience in teaching her students who have additional learning needs in their literacy development.

In New Zealand, Jane enrolled in further study, acquiring a Bachelor of Teaching, qualifying her to work with school-age learners, and began working in a teaching support position in a secondary school. Later, a SENCO position became available, and Jane was asked to apply. In our first interview, Jane explained her feelings of preparedness for this role in her own words:

I was encouraged to take it up, basically. I’ve always been able to build rapport with students really easily and have a lot of empathy for where they’ve come from and where they’re going to go. For me, empathy is a big thing that they don’t actually get. And that’s something the previous principal was looking for in the new SENCO—someone who could bring empathy to the role. So even though I didn’t necessarily have specific experience, I had what the school needed—the empathy—and could learn the rest. (Jane, interview one)

Jane's comment illustrates her belief that personal characteristics (in particular, empathy) were crucial to the successful fulfilment of her role. Jane believes that these personal qualities made her an appropriate candidate for the role, and she has been able to pick up the specifics of the role over time.

Jane has now held this SENCO position for more than three years. Jane's official job title is part-time SENCO and part-time librarian (0.5 FTEs for each). However, Jane explained that her "librarian" time is often used for the responsibilities of the SENCO role or dealing with issues that arise during the day. Jane indicated she was responsible for approximately 10% of the enrolled students with 10–15 students identified as high needs and 45–50 students requiring some form of support.

Jane took on this role with what she describes as "very little specific training or experience." She described that she used her prior experience and reached out to friends in education to support her and help teach her aspects of the role. The support of other people has been very important for Jane: "It's been a lot of learning on the job and a lot of talking to people—people within the Ministry and people within the school." Jane had hoped that the previous SENCO would help train her in the role, "but, unfortunately, she up and left, and I kind of had to figure it all out for myself!" Jane credits her relationships with friends and people in the education sector for helping her to "figure out what I was doing."

6.2.2 Kim

Kim is a SENCO of a large secondary school (approximately 1,000 students) in the North Island of New Zealand. Kim has held positions outside the mainstream school model, primarily working as a teacher aide in special education schools. That work drew her to an interest in working with students with additional learning needs in a secondary school.

In our first and second interviews, Kim commented on feeling "untrained" and "inexperienced" to take on the SENCO role in terms of official training and qualifications. When asked to detail her experience before taking on the SENCO role, Kim stated, "I feel embarrassed saying this, but I don't have any official teacher training or qualifications in special education, which makes me feel like a fraud sometimes." Kim believes that she has

relied heavily on her experience working in special education schools, which helped prepare her for this role. Prior to holding the SENCO role, Kim was a teacher aide within her current school for two years. Kim believes that her experience as a teacher aide, being in the “same shoes” as the teacher aides, gives her an advantage as a SENCO and experience from which to draw. As Kim explained, “I think it gave them [teacher aides] that trust in me to believe that this is the right thing at the right time. I’ve been in their shoes, so they trusted my opinion.”

Kim believes the two years working under the previous SENCO were crucial in preparing her for this role. Kim states that she took what she had learned by observing the previous SENCO and then used her experience to “make the role my own.” When Kim’s supervising SENCO left the role, Kim was offered the head SENCO position. Kim has now been in this lead SENCO role for two years. She worked out what she describes as the “requirements of the role” by sitting down with the previous SENCO and asking her to write a list of the role’s responsibilities. This list worked out to be ten pages of bullet points.

Although Kim acknowledged all that was involved, she was not daunted by the list, stating:

But actually, when you look into what it actually is, I had a pretty good idea from working under her. And I was terrified. But at the same time, I knew, I guess, with my own confidence, my knowledge and skill. I thought I'd just do it and see what comes up. (Kim, interview one)

Reflecting on her feelings of preparedness and belief in her abilities, Kim, in our third and final interview (March 2021) commented, “it took me a little while to be confident in my own ability, my own opinion, and trust in myself. But I think I’ve got that now, so bring it!” I noted that this was in direct contrast with the thoughts expressed in her first interview, in which Kim stated she had no idea what she was doing and was “making it up” as she went along.

While the relationship with the previous SENCO was greatly valued, Kim also spoke frequently about her reliance on relationships with other educational professionals and specialists to gain the knowledge and resources to fulfil this role. At our second interview

(November 2020), Kim explained:

Working at a high school, you don't know what's out there, and you have to deal with ICAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health], and then you're dealing with Northern Health, and then you're dealing with the Ministry, and then you're dealing with the RTLB [Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour] and all these different agencies. And you're working all these different hats. And unless you're under an IWS [Intensive Wraparound Service], how do you pull it all together? (Kim, interview two)

Kim's comments suggest that a key component of the role is building relationships with key services, understanding their role, and bringing these services and resources together to access educational support for individual students. Kim explained that she could form and maintain relationships that have been her "lifeline" in this role:

I don't know how other SENCOs do it without these relationships. My ability to make relationships is my lifeline. I just go to these people and ask how to do things and ask for their help and kind of force a relationship (laughs). If I wasn't able to make these relationships, I really would be working on my own in the dark. (Kim, interview two)

Within Kim's full-time SENCO position, her main responsibility is leading a learning centre in the school, which operates as a hub for all students requiring additional educational support. The centre also functions as a transition unit for students who cannot manage full-time schooling in the mainstream system. Kim has responsibility for the school's teacher aides, corresponds with all specialists and education divisions, and teaches programmes within her learning centre.

6.2.3 Liz

Liz, the third case study participant, is a SENCO of a small secondary school (300 students) in a semirural area in the North Island region. Liz completed her university training overseas,

gaining a degree in sociology and working within this field. After returning to New Zealand, Liz tried to find a career that would use these skills. Deciding that teaching would be a good option, Liz completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching and taught at the primary level for ten years. During this time in the classroom, Liz felt that she was not utilising her skills developed over her career, particularly in inclusive education, which she describes as her “niche.” When her current school’s SENCO left, Liz was employed as the new SENCO and was taken out of the classroom full time to focus specifically on leading the school’s inclusive education provisions. The full-time position allowed Liz to engage in professional learning opportunities to prepare her for the role and create an inclusive education department. She commented, “so I did reading recovery training and did SENCO support for more hours of the week than a school would normally allow. And then basically started creating a learning support department for the school in inclusive education.” Liz has held the SENCO position within her school for over four years.

Liz explained that she has complete autonomy about how she structures her SENCO time to best support students. Liz chose to elaborate on this, stating that she felt very grateful to hold this position at her school:

I know from experience that there are hardly any SENCOs out there who get to do this role full time. I see the frustration because it’s definitely a full-time role. I just feel so grateful that my school put so much value on this role to make it a full-time position. Because it definitely is a full-time position—I don’t know how I would get everything done in a part-time capacity, and I feel really sorry for those SENCOs who are expected to do this role part time. (Liz, interview one)

During her participation in this research study, Liz’s official role title changed from full-time SENCO to part-time SENCO and part-time learning support coordinator (LSC; officially 0.5 FTEs for each role). When asked to elaborate on this, Liz stated that her school had realised the inclusive education sector was changing. Liz had been preparing her school for the changes since 2017 by becoming very familiar with the draft Learning Support Action Plan (MOE, 2017) and taking steps to implement the suggestions into the school. Steps taken included creating a common language across the school using the vocabulary and

suggestions of the Learning Support Action Plan, “so when the learning support coordinator role finally came out, I made sure I secured that and have been able to work within the priorities for our school ... So, for me, it makes the position very functional.”

Liz felt well prepared to take on both the SENCO and LSC positions. She worked as part of the board of trustees and senior leadership team (SLT) to create an inclusive education department, using the Learning Support Action Plan and identifying the school's individual needs. During the final interview (March 2021), I asked Liz to unpack her approach to preparing for this change and incorporating these two roles. Liz explains that she used the individual needs of her school to blend these two roles to best suit the needs of the school:

I would look at what our needs are in our school and what that would basically look like for our school. So, I moulded it all together to make sure it would all be covered for what the government wanted but also making sure it was for our students. That was my purpose. That was my “why.” (Liz, interview one)

Liz further explained that she does this role because she is passionate about “making sure teachers support their kids in the best way they can.” Liz believes that her social work background, psychology, and teaching are the “perfect combination to equip me for my role—it’s just everything I encompass; it’s just natural for me.”

Although Liz is in a different working situation to the other two participants, she demonstrated an excitement for the future and the possibilities for this role. Liz spoke enthusiastically about plans she had for the following years and ways in which to incorporate additional educational needs support across the school. It could be implied that the impact of recent change (creation of this new role) has refreshed Liz’s sense of motivation.

The purpose of this section has been to provide background to these three SENCOs to understand their unique situations and motivations in the role. This section also highlights the unique context for each SENCO and is also somewhat of a response to Jane’s concerns in the epigraph, suggesting that there is no “one way” to be a SENCO; difference is apparent.

The participant profiles suggest that, for these three SENCOs, each had a very unique set of skills, experiences, and qualifications prior to the SENCO role, and individual skills and experiences can be unique according to the needs and priorities of a school. Each of these three individuals has had very different inductions into the role and faces very different circumstances in terms of hours for the role, expectations, and job descriptions (or a complete lack of job descriptions). Examining the experiences of just three individuals highlights the potential diversity among SENCOs in New Zealand schools. The next section (Section 6.2) uses discussions in the semistructured interviews to document the day-to-day experiences of the three participant SENCOs to detail the SENCO roles in practice.

6.2 Recruitment and Job Descriptions

Recruitment into the SENCO position was similar for all three participants. Jane, Kim, and Liz had all been working in their current secondary school but in other positions as detailed in the previous section. Although none of these individuals were specifically trained for a SENCO role, they had been encouraged to apply due to the relationships they were able to build with students, which seemingly suggests that school management valued these relational characteristics over specific training.

It is interesting to note that only one of these individuals, Liz, was a trained secondary teacher. Kim was a teacher aide and only had previous work experience in a special school and some short courses to prepare her for this position. Jane was previously a support person in the school and therefore was familiar with school systems but did not hold any formal teaching qualifications. Therefore, of the three participants, Liz was the only SENCO with a current teaching qualification and registration. Participants expressed a belief that personal attributes and prior experience may be of greater value to school leaders in the appointment of SENCOs than traditional teaching qualifications. However, further research is required to better understand employment considerations from the perspective of school principals.

Of the three participants, only one SENCO participant was provided with an official job description from the school. Liz's SENCO job description included five key tasks: support students with additional learning needs, create and monitor individual education plans

(IEPs), manage a team of teacher aides, support the staff with professional development and learning, and report regularly to the leadership team and the board of trustees. At the time, there was little information from the MOE regarding her other role as the LSC or what was required. Liz was unsure how to make the two roles work together or how much time to allocate to each role but states: “I ended up working it out on my own” (Liz, interview two).

For the other two participants in this study, there was no job description at all. In Jane’s case, she met with the previous SENCO for a day before starting her new role, and the outgoing SENCO showed Jane what she did. Jane had requested a job description from management but received a response from the principal that the job was “to support students with special education needs in the school.”

Kim also sat down with the outgoing SENCO to create a job description as there was not one currently and created a 10-page bullet-point list of tasks that the outgoing SENCO believed she covered in her role. When I asked Kim to summarise this 10-page list at our second interview point (November 2020), Kim explained that approximately half the items related to student support, one quarter related to the management of teacher aides, and the other quarter related to administration, reporting, and staff support.

Although only one participant had an official job description, all three provided accounts of their responsibilities, from which I compiled a list outlining the core aspects of the SENCO role in New Zealand secondary schools. According to these participants, the key tasks and responsibilities include:

- Being available and responsive to student needs—student support;
- Managing a team of teacher aides;
- Supporting teachers;
- Meeting with families/whānau;
- Meeting with outside agencies;
- Writing and reviewing individual education plans (IEPs);
- Applying for funding and accessing resourcing;

- Completing testing;
- Supporting assessment;
- Reporting to families, teachers, school leaders, and board of trustees;
- Transitioning students; and
- Overseeing crisis management.

To summarise Section 6.2, the SENCO participants in this study are experienced, passionate, and empathetic individuals. They are mature females with an extensive background in education and related fields requiring empathy, such as social work and youth work, and working with individuals. However, these SENCOs are not all trained teachers or registered teachers; school employers appear to hire these SENCOs for their personal characteristics and career history. All three participants were internally recruited, assuming the position without a formal application process. Only one of the SENCOs has an official job description, but the other two SENCOs worked with previous SENCOs and school leaders to compile lists of tasks and expectations for the role. The SENCOs appear to be personally invested in the role, carrying out the role for the satisfaction of seeing the improvement and progress that individual students make. All three participants deemed it necessary to be empathetic and to be able to maintain relationships. While none have specialised training, all three SENCOs have trained on the job, gaining the necessary experience while working. Participants gave a sense that building a relationship with students and having empathy for their students is not recognised as a responsibility of the role but is a necessary factor in fulfilling the role effectively.

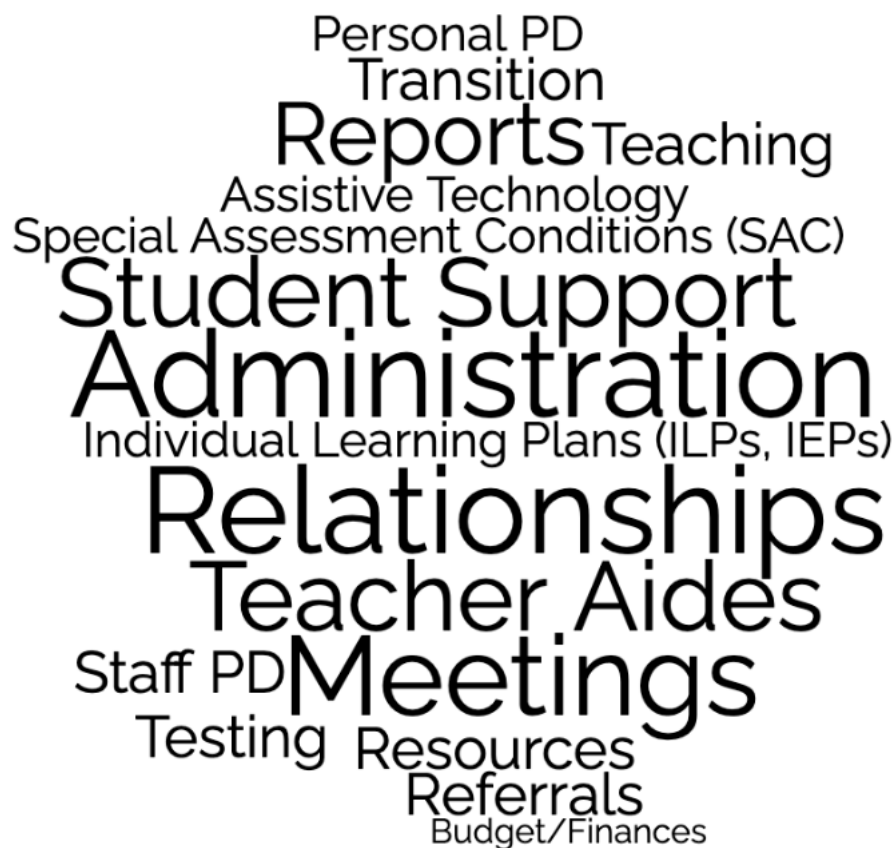
6.3 Responsibilities of the SENCO Role Enacted

The first step in examining the SENCO role in a New Zealand secondary school was to unpack the responsibilities of the role enacted as briefly mentioned in the summary of job descriptions in Section 6.2. When asked to list the role's responsibilities, there was a sense from all three participants that they could not communicate the full extent of the role and its responsibilities. Across the nine semistructured interviews, I asked participants to detail "What responsibilities are you most busy with at this time of year?" Kim explained: "It's so big that I can't explain it all." Liz stated: "I guess there are 101 things you could put under

the umbrella. It's huge!" while Jane laughed and questioned whether I had all day to hear her list of responsibilities. After discussions with case study participants and examining the responsibilities listed by survey respondents across the nine interviews, I came up with a list of the most frequently indicated responsibilities of the role, displayed in the WordArt in Figure 11.

Figure 11:

WordArt Displaying SENCO Role Responsibilities as Reported by Case Study Participants



In Figure 11, the size of the text has been used to indicate the frequency with which participants mentioned a responsibility by counting the number of times these terms appeared in interview transcripts across the nine interviews. There were nine responsibilities frequently mentioned:

- Administrative responsibilities;
- Meetings;
- Transition;
- Professional development;
- Resourcing;
- Student support;
- SENCO availability;
- Student needs; and
- Teacher aide management.

To understand these responsibilities of the role enacted in more detail, I unpack each of these responsibilities, using specific examples from the case study interviews.

6.3.1 Administrative Responsibilities

As seen in the WordArt in Figure 11, administrative responsibilities and tasks that can be grouped under this label were one of the most frequently mentioned responsibilities of the SENCO role. Participants provided a lengthy list of administrative expectations, including meetings, testing, referrals to agencies, individual learning plans (ILPs), individual education plans (IEPs), reports to management/board of trustees, reports to the MOE/specialist agencies, SAC applications, regularly reporting to families, budgets, and purchasing resources. This section (Section 6.3.1), details the extent of some of these administrative responsibilities by using specific examples from case study participants.

Case study participants detailed a heavy administrative workload required for each individual student with additional learning needs. Firstly, SENCOs are required to carry out testing to ascertain the students' level of ability and required areas of support. The

information from testing is then used to create an IEP or ILP to list the strengths of the student, the identified areas of need, and to plan for the learning needs of the student and the resources/support required. This plan is then shared with all interested parties (teachers, parents/whānau, teacher aides, management, and external agencies). Supports are then put in place, including accessing resourcing/funding/external agency support where needed. According to comments from participants, there is a requirement for these IEPs to be reviewed and updated at least once per term. Kim was able to provide an insight into the heavy workload of ILPs, stating that her April school holidays would be spent “writing and updating 78 ILPs for students because my principal insists these are updated every term. Sadly, they often take up most of my school holidays.” Jane commented that each ILP takes her approximately eight hours to create, “so it’s going to take me at least 624 hours to get all of these done,” referring to the current number of students on her register who require new learning plans.

All three case study participants indicated that the most challenging aspect of the SENCO role is the workload and not enough time to complete the administrative responsibilities of the role. Acknowledging the time intensity of administrative responsibilities and ensuing feelings of guilt for not completing these tasks was a recurrent discussion in case study interviews. Jane identified administrative tasks as the most time-intensive responsibilities of her role. However, her comments also indicate her perception of the importance of these responsibilities, particularly aspects of the administration. She identified IEPs and SAC as the most time-consuming administrative tasks. Jane explained, “although I know how important they are, I don’t do enough of them. I feel so guilty about how behind I am with my IEPs.” Liz also spoke of the heavy and time-consuming administrative component of the role: “It’s all the written work you have to do, but there’s never enough time to do it.” In a similar comment, Kim highlighted the administrative demands, stating, “it’s a huge list. I don’t think people actually understand what it entails.” Shortly after this comment, Kim’s train of thought was interrupted with thoughts of the IEPs due later that week and the guilt she experiences when reflecting on how far behind she feels. Feelings of stress and guilt accompanied discussions of the administrative responsibilities for each student.

6.3.2 Meetings

The second most frequently identified role responsibility, meetings, was discussed regularly within interview comments and was seen as both a necessity of the role and a heavy time burden. Comments from case study respondents indicate that meetings are a regular occurrence of the role and occur at many levels. Meetings are within the school community (with teachers, teacher aides, management, parents/whānau) and external to the school community (primarily with the MOE, RTLBs, and other external agencies).

The case study interviews provided an opportunity to unpack these meetings, the expectations surrounding meetings, and how these are used to support the SENCO role. Jane explained that meetings dominate her time: meetings with families, teacher aides, teachers, management, the MOE, and other educational professionals. Jane explained that an additional difficulty could be that teachers and school management often talk to her about students during morning tea or lunch breaks. As Jane explains, “it's the only time they have to catch up with you in their busy day, but it doesn't make it easy for me because my day feels like endless meetings with no mental downtime.” Liz and Kim also commented on the necessity to forgo lunchtimes and evenings to accommodate meetings.

Participants saw meetings as numerous but a valuable part of the role. Meetings were considered necessary due to the heavy reliance on positive relationships within the school and with several external agencies to ensure ongoing support for students and appropriate attention and responses to their needs. Kim described meetings as a “frustrating burden” on her time but necessary for giving her the knowledge to fulfil her role. Kim explains the importance of these agency meetings:

Sometimes a meeting with a representative from the Ministry [of Education] may take two hours of the day. But even though that meeting may put me behind, the amount that can be achieved for one student in that meeting is invaluable. I can secure two years' funding for them or gain access to a teacher aide. Plus the family and other involved agencies come along, which can save hours of emails and phone

calls. The value of having everyone in the same room, making a plan for one student, is just invaluable. (Kim, interview one)

Kim actively sets up meetings with RTLBs, LSCs, the MOE and other related agencies to inform herself on what these agencies provide and seek support and resources to help her fulfil the SENCO role. All three SENCO participants spoke about the importance of making the time for meetings to seek knowledge and resourcing, and to support their effective functioning in the SENCO role.

6.3.3 Transition

One of the most discussed responsibilities of the SENCO role was the transition of Year 8 students with additional learning needs from primary school to secondary school. Supporting the transition of these students was described by all three participants as one of the most important aspects of the role and a particularly time-intensive responsibility, especially towards the end of the school year. SENCOs were required to communicate with primary schools to gather and collate primary school data, including student profiles. SENCOs were also required to test and interview students, plan for those students with identified needs, plan transition days for students with identified needs, and communicate with teachers/whānau to support careful transition for those students needing more closely monitored support.

End-of-year transition, to support those students moving to a new year level, was also considered a crucial and time-intensive responsibility. Participants commented on the time needed to carefully manage these transitions, including communication with students/whānau/teachers and writing plans and reports. Liz explained that the last three to four weeks of each school year is dedicated to working on transition plans for new students coming into the school while Jane explains her role is to visit local primary schools and meet with students' prior teachers to provide more information regarding the students' needs, calling this her "contributing school visit month." Kim was busy with transition tasks at our second interview point (December 2020), meeting with new students and their whānau to put plans in place, while Kim explained transitioning students "pretty much takes up my whole November and December just preparing for these new students."

6.3.4 Professional Development

Another frequently discussed responsibility was professional development—both delivering training and advice to staff and engaging in ongoing learning themselves. Jane and Liz noted that they were expected to provide regular whole-staff professional development on diverse educational needs and strategies for supporting students whereas Kim’s role involved offering this training and support to individual teachers or smaller groups.

There was a strong sense of the importance of SENCOs participating in regular professional development to keep updated in all areas of inclusive education. Case study respondents indicated that regular professional development was a crucial responsibility to fulfil the position’s responsibilities. Liz summarised this responsibility by stating, “I have to keep myself updated, with courses and training, because no one else is going to do it for me! If I don’t keep my knowledge updated, I can’t do my job—it’s as simple as that!” Jane expressed a similar view, explaining that “Special Education is always evolving and we’re always learning.” Jane explained that new additional learning needs are being identified, and the field is constantly learning better ways to meet the needs of these students. Therefore, Jane summarises, “it’s essential to keep up with this learning and keep myself updated, for the sake of my students.” On a similar note, Liz explained, “it’s just one of those jobs where it’s essential to keep on top of the research and the latest findings.” There was a unanimous sense from participants that regular upskilling and professional development is an essential component of the role to keep updated with developments in inclusive education.

Despite the apparent importance of this professional development, participants suggested there was little time within the 40-hour week to participate in any learning. Comments from participants suggested that, due to the heavy administrative workload of the role, this upskilling in knowledge needed to happen outside of work hours. In our second interview, Jane discussed that she would be spending her school holidays reading and attending courses: “Training and learning is the most important part of my role, but I can’t fit it into my week, and I can’t take time off because my students need me. So, I plan these courses

and training for school holidays or weekends.” This viewpoint was supported by Liz’s comments, who also indicated the necessity for learning to happen outside work hours:

I need to keep myself upskilled, but the only time to do this is during school holidays. I always laugh when people tell me I’m so lucky to be a teacher because I get school holidays off. My holidays are always spent training so I can do my job properly! (Liz, Interview three)

Despite the apparent importance of this professional development, two participants were not provided with the time during their workdays to complete this training so were expected to complete this training outside of work hours. Jane believes the expectation to complete professional development in their personal time shows the “lack of value management places on my upskilling.”

6.3.5 Resourcing

The challenges of the role were further reflected in experiences with resourcing. All three case study participants reflected on the frustration of being provided with physical resourcing (money), but they believe they lack the time or experience to know how best to spend this resourcing. Within the second interview, Liz provided a specific example of a recent resourcing frustration she had faced for one of her students:

Last week, we accepted a new student onto the roll. He is ORS [Ongoing Resource Scheme] funded, which means that although he comes with lots of funding, he requires pretty much one-on-one care. Then my boss chucked the huge amount of money in my budget and said, “there you go.” I was like, what the heck do I do with this? Suddenly, I have a student who needs constant monitoring. I’ve got zero free teacher aides. I think I cried for a week straight that week. (Liz, Interview two)

Liz’s example provides an insight into the challenge SENCOs can face when suddenly working with a student with very high needs. Although financial resourcing may be provided, the training, support, and time Liz needed were missing, leading to significant stress in her role.

Kim also explains the frustrations of resourcing but not having the time to benefit from this resourcing:

You never have time to actually put things into practice—they kind of just throw money at you—whatever you need, we'll get it. And I'm like—when have I got time to organise what I need? When have I got the time to research or work out what that student needs? (Kim, interview two)

These interview comments suggest that SENCOs can access financial support to provide resourcing for their students. However, a lack of time and knowledge may inhibit their successful use of these resources. Comments also reflected the emotional toll and stress that accompanies these resourcing challenges.

6.3.6 Student Support

One of the key messages from interview responses was that the individual needs of each student vary widely, and this support could look very different for each student at any given time. SENCOs place high expectations on themselves to provide support on a case-by-case basis according to the specific needs on any given day. Kim summarised this idea, explaining, “ultimately you're enabling students to be able to access education—so that they're in the right place to be able to access the right learning for them.” This quote from Kim and comments from the other case study participants gave a sense of the responsive nature of the role: responsibilities that have been grouped under the larger heading of “student support.” Participants found it difficult to put into words this responsibility or what was required. There was also a sense that this is not necessarily a responsibility acknowledged by job descriptions or management's expectations. However, case study comments indicated that SENCOs saw this role as providing individualised support for students and being available to provide this support as and where needed. In practice, this included being available for distressed students, providing a “safe space” for students unable to be in class, being available for students removed from class, teaching students who cannot be in class, dealing with urgent student matters as they arise, and providing pastoral care to students.

6.3.7 SENCO Availability

Constant interruptions during the nine interviews on school sites provided a snapshot of the apparent need for SENCOs to be constantly available, often neglecting their own needs or break times. Despite attempts to let management, staff, and students know that SENCOs would be unavailable due to a scheduled meeting, interruptions were common and frequent. Interruptions included urgent student matters (students removed from class, distressed students, and students who needed SENCO support), staff matters (teacher aides who urgently needed help and a teacher aide who needed to go home sick), and management seeking information. Kim commented on this apparent need to be constantly available: “I need to be on the ground supporting kids.” Jane laughed after an interruption, stating, “see—this is why I couldn’t meet you out of school for this interview; I’m constantly needed!” One of Jane’s interviews was at 3:00 p.m. She apologised for eating during our interview, explaining that she had not yet taken a break to eat due to constant interruptions. Forgoing lunch breaks seemed to be a common occurrence for all three participants. From the discussions I had with participants, this did not seem to be an expectation from management but an expectation SENCOs place on themselves.

The expectations SENCOs appear to place on themselves—to be available and responsive at all times—has a significant impact on the enacted SENCO role. Although SENCOs may set time aside to complete administrative tasks, being constantly available and responsive has a large impact on the structure of their day. The school’s SENCO may have planned to spend the day completing ILPs, but an issue with a student takes priority, and handling, managing, and resolving the issue may take up the rest of the day. Specific examples of the unexpected demands of this responsiveness were illustrated within the SENCO stories. At Jane’s second interview, she described:

No two days are the same. You come in in the morning, and you don’t know what’s going to hit you, and that’s OK. You just work around what is going to make it work. I arrive at school at eight o’clock, and it’s go, go, go until I go home in the afternoon. (Jane, interview two)

All three SENCOs repeated the fact that they believe there is no “typical day” and no two days the same. The variation is largely due to the unpredictable, responsive, and often stressful nature of the role. Jane elaborated on the responsive nature of the role, explaining the need for day-to-day monitoring and adjustments for individual students. Jane needs to monitor students daily and adjust the students’ support as needed to prevent potential problems. This includes assessing students’ classes for the day and identifying any potential complications, like a relieving teacher or changes to classes, which may be very disruptive for her students. Jane explained that this responsibility requires her to be vigilant all day, observing for warning signs, and she can never take time away from her office: “I just eat lunch at my desk because it’s easier that way. I need to be on the ground at all times in case one of the students flares up.” Kim believes she needs to be available at all times to “put out the fires.”

To further illustrate this theme of the necessary responsiveness, Kim provided a sad example of her students being upset by the death of a fellow student. Kim recognised the immediate need of her students and spent the next week letting go of all other responsibilities and focusing on the emotional needs. Kim believed that within this role, SENCOs need to be willing to drop everything and respond to the needs of their students, and everything else has to wait: “My entire week was gone. I was so behind it wasn’t funny, and I spent months catching up. But that’s just what you have to do. The needs of your students come first.” In this case, Kim appears to value the emotional wellbeing of her students more than her own workload, health, or physical needs. When I asked Kim whether this was something her school leadership team expected of her, she stated, “I don’t think my principal has a clue that I miss my lunchbreaks. It’s just what I have to do for my students. It’s not worth risking taking time out for myself.”

All three participants commented on the importance of sacrificing their own needs to be free and available to support students when the need arises, whether a student cannot cope in a class and needs a “safe space” or requires support with an assessment. As Liz explained, “I think just supporting the students themselves is important—being there so they can come and talk to you.”

Participants demonstrated an awareness of the necessity for flexibility in the role, which they understand might not be possible for other SENCOs. All three participants mentioned gratitude and appreciation for not having any formal teaching component in their individual schools. Still, they were aware that many SENCOs have fixed teaching time incorporated into their role. Kim and Liz both explained that the lack of specific teaching expectations allows them to have the necessary flexibility to deal with anything that crops up. Both participants stated that they would have concerns for students if they were required to have teaching time and classes in their role. Jane explained the potential disadvantage of teaching time in more specific detail:

I've been so lucky because I haven't had to have that line of teaching. So, I've been available and can move anywhere and everywhere. But I know that lots of other SENCOs are expected to teach. It's set in their timetable, and if you have that teaching line, that flexibility is gone. I think some of the students are going to suffer because of that. (Jane, interview three)

Jane voiced the belief that without constant availability, students with diverse educational needs are left vulnerable. The participants in this study have voiced that they believe they need to always make themselves available, despite their own health or priorities, to help prevent any problems for their students. The specific examples and comments across the nine interviews reiterate the perceived necessity for SENCOs to sacrifice their own needs and always stay available for student issues.

6.3.8 Student Needs Extending Beyond the "List"

By the second interview, it became apparent to me that these SENCO participants were supporting not just the formally identified students on their lists (or registers) but also several students who were not formally identified. When asked about the numbers and types of students SENCOs support, Jane's response highlighted the challenge for SENCOs:

The Ministry supports about a quarter of the students that I support. I somehow have to stretch that funding to the full group of students I support, many of which

are not formally identified at all. But I need to provide support to these students, so what am I supposed to do? (Jane, interview one)

SENCO participants are supporting many students who are not on their lists, including students with mental health challenges and behavioural problems. Participants identified four key reasons for this expansion of needs:

1. Parent expectations/pressure;
2. Teacher expectations/pressure (severe behavioural challenges);
3. Inequity accessing formal diagnoses; and
4. Mental health challenges.

Each of these factors is now discussed in more detail, providing examples from SENCO participants. Participants spoke about pressure from parents, who believed their children had additional learning needs and required further support in the classroom. Liz spoke to the idea of parent pressure for supports:

You've got the list of funded students, which is minimal, then you have all the kids whose parents believe they have special needs, and many of them probably do. But that's the hardest thing about the job and the bit that parents don't get—we only get funding for those tiny percentage of students who actually have a diagnosis. (Liz, interview three)

Therefore, parent pressure may result in students being provided with support by the SENCO despite a lack of formal diagnosis or funding.

Similarly, SENCO participants discussed the pressure they sometimes receive from teachers, who believe that a student in their class has additional needs or requires further support to achieve within the classroom, but that student does not have an official diagnosis of needs to place them on their learning needs register. This pressure from teachers was due to students achieving significantly below their classmates or students who had significantly challenging behaviour but no formal diagnosis of needs. Liz explained that this pressure often occurs due to students with extreme behaviour challenges, who, due to their inability

to focus in class, create stress for the teacher and make it difficult to teach the rest of the class. However, as Liz continues to explain, “if I don’t put a teacher aide in with these kids, the teachers struggle and come crying to me! I have to support my teachers, but they don’t understand that I have no money or teacher aide time to do this!” This places SENCO participants in a challenging position, trying to support their colleagues but limited by funding and resources.

This then leads into the third factor for students requiring support who are not on the learning needs register—the cost of formal diagnosis and the possible inequity this may cause. Participants explained that, for students to receive an official diagnosis that is recognised by the MOE, an official diagnosis needs to be provided from a registered educational psychologist. In the majority of cases, this is something that needs to be funded directly from parents at an approximate cost of \$600–\$1,000. SENCO participants explained that they believe this causes inequity for their parents: those families who can afford this are able to access a formal diagnosis, and those families who cannot afford this do not gain the official diagnosis and therefore miss out on funding even though their child may have an undiagnosed need. There is a potentially ethnic/socioeconomic bias preventing some families accessing diagnoses. This is explained by Kim:

Well of course you have your formally identified students who are on SENCO ‘register’. These are the students whose families have been able to afford formal identification or whose behaviours have been so bad that the schools or Ministry have investigated a diagnosis. But then you have the huge group of students who are not even on the list. These are the kids who probably do have a diagnosis, but their families can’t afford to see a specialist. (Kim, interview one)

Removing obstacles and potential socioeconomic barriers to diagnoses is explored later in Chapter Eight.

The final reason SENCO participants gave for students being on their list of supported students was due to significant mental health challenges. Typically, these students do not have additional educational needs that require further support to achieve in the classroom,

but, without extra support, these students may struggle to thrive in the classroom and can cause stress for teachers and fellow students. All three participants explained that, since the pandemic, the number of students with anxiety and other mental health challenges who are struggling to attend full-time classes has significantly increased. SENCO participants have chosen to provide a safe space for these students for when their anxiety is too high to attend the classroom and they need a quiet place to be. Often, this requires SENCO participants to be available in their room in case one of these students turns up and needs emotional support. Jane explained, “when one of my anxious kids turns up needing me, I just need to drop everything.” When I asked whether this was an expectation of management, Jane elaborated that it was not but a choice that she was consciously making, “because if I don’t offer a safe space to them, who will? Where will they go?” Providing mental health support appeared to be a gap within the secondary school system that SENCO participants had chosen to fill to provide these students with support. As many of these students do not have diagnosed educational needs, SENCOs are supporting these students outside of their learning needs register and with no extra funding or support to do so. Management’s knowledge of the needs that SENCOs support is unpacked more in Chapter Eight.

6.3.9 The Employer Aspect of the SENCO Role: Managing Teacher Aides

As identified by case study interview comments, a major responsibility of the SENCO role is the management of teacher aides. The management of teacher aides had previously been identified in the survey results, with over 80% of survey respondents stating that “managing teacher aides” was a key responsibility of the SENCO role. When asked to comment on tasks in the SENCO role, one survey respondent chose to comment: “Managing my team of teacher aides is probably a full-time job in itself!”

Using interview comments, I was able to gain some understanding of the role teacher aides play in secondary schools and the ensuing responsibility placed on the SENCO. Secondary schools employ teacher aides to provide support to teachers and students in the classroom, either funded one-on-one support for high-need students or to provide support to small groups of students. Although principals appoint these teacher aides, case study comments

confirmed that the responsibility for the management of teacher aides was an expectation of the SENCO role.

Participants noted the responsibilities associated with teacher aides include: training, providing professional development opportunities, appraisal, regular meetings, and creating a timetable/schedule for teacher aides. All three SENCO participants had at least five teacher aides under their guidance/supervision, and Kim stated that she has a team of 13 teacher aides to manage. SENCO participants explained that a key responsibility is the appropriate scheduling and placement of teacher aides, ensuring all students who have funded individualised support are provided with access to a teacher aide in all classes that require this support. SENCOs are also required to appropriately pair individual teacher aide personalities and skills to individual students and monitor classes each day to ensure all students and classes are covered in case of absences. Kim explained the responsibility of the coordination of teacher aides and the impact this can have on the SENCO role:

Coordination of teacher aides is my most important role. And that's on a big scale—that's not just saying you need to go there, you need to go there; underneath, it's what teacher aides are needed for which students—where their strengths are and that kind of stuff. That probably takes up a lot of my time, . . . It's literally my most important task. (Kim, interview one)

SENCOs were also responsible for providing appropriate training and professional development opportunities to their teacher aides to enable them to fulfil their roles. SENCOs are required to upskill teacher aides as needed in specific learning needs. Kim explains that a student with dyspraxia was enrolled in the school, and because there was no teacher aide yet familiar with this learning need, she was required to upskill herself and then provide training for all teacher aides who would work with this student. As explained by Kim at our third interview:

A new student enrolled part way through the year with a formal diagnosis and teacher aide funding for dyspraxia. This was a steep learning curve for me and the team—we had never even heard of dyspraxia! Due to pressure from management

and the parents, my team and I were expected to immediately research and learn about this need and find the best ways to support this student. I think we did it all in about a week and a half; it was crazy. (Kim, interview three)

When questioned about this, Kim stated there was no formal access to learning for such conditions; Kim did her own research from home, using articles and research literature, to upskill herself.

Although managing teacher aides was seen as a large and time-consuming responsibility, all three participants emphasised the vital importance teacher aides play within the school. Jane commented that she believes her role would be impossible without the support of teacher aides, and her whole day can “fall to pieces” if a teacher aide rings in sick. In this instance, the SENCO is immediately responsible for organising a person to cover this teacher aide, which, in most cases, may mean the SENCO themselves needs to step into that role for the day. This then has implications for SENCO availability and responsiveness for any other incidents that day.

Participants unanimously agreed that they wanted more time for working with their team of teacher aides. Liz stated that one of the most valuable aspects of her role was the twice-weekly meetings with teacher aides (she called these “Teacher aide collaborative talks”). In these talks, they discussed issues, shared collective successes/frustrations, planned as a team, and provided support where needed. Liz explained that due to heavy administrative demands and frequent meetings with external agencies, she had not made time for these collaborative talks, making it difficult to support her teacher aides. However, on reflection at the final interview, Liz stated that these meetings were a valuable part of her role and needed to become a priority. Given the significance of relationships with teacher aides and the enactment of relational agency, a more detailed discussion of teacher aides is provided in Chapter Seven.

6.3.10 Summary of SENCO Role

Section 6.3 has summarised the nine key tasks of a SENCO in a New Zealand secondary school as identified by the three case study participants. In summary, these tasks include:

- Administrative responsibilities;
- Meetings with stakeholders;
- Support of transitioning students and whanau;
- Professional development;
- Coordination of resourcing;
- Student support;
- Availability and flexibility;
- Student needs above and beyond the “list”; and
- Management of teacher aides.

While this section covered the practical and physical aspects of the role as outlined by case study participants, there were many aspects of the role not identified by this list. Participants detailed components of the role that were more emotional in nature, above and beyond these nine practical tasks of the role. The next section details what could be considered as the unseen aspects of the SENCO role enacted: the emotional tasks and the emotional impact of the role.

6.4 Emotional Aspects of the SENCO Role Enacted

This section focuses on the emotional aspects of the role enacted: aspects of the role which, until the case study interviews, had not been apparent in discussions of expectations of the role (from the MOE, school leaders, and expectations SENCOs place on themselves).

6.4.1 Workload and Impact on Life Outside Work

A SENCO’s day is not concluded at the end of the school day. Case study participants indicated the role often impacts time outside of work with the role often spilling over into personal time. Frequent comments expressed feelings of “not enough time,” “too many hats,” and “not having time to do the important parts of the job.” Comments indicated that SENCOs see work outside of school hours as necessary to fulfil all responsibilities of the role. Kim provided the example of work interruptions during personal time: “So, I’ll often be walking my dog and my phone rings, and I’ll be having a conversation with a parent while I’m not at work—you know what I mean? It just doesn’t end.” Jane explained that the

demands of the role require her to work through nights, weekends, and holidays. Liz indicated that she often gives up evenings or weekends for the role, but she does this willingly because she loves her job. Kim's views were similar to the thoughts of the other case study participants. She explained, "you still end up working a lot through your nights, weekends, and holidays ... I'm learning that you can't get everything done. It's just impossible, and you end up driving yourself crazy." Kim's comment reflects the theme that was apparent throughout survey and interview comments: the demands of the role are overwhelming, and personal time must be sacrificed, to some extent, to keep up with the demands of the role. Participant examples suggest it may be potentially unrealistic to successfully fulfil all expected responsibilities of the role within a 40-hour week. Participants stated that their employers (principals) often did not realise the extra hours that the role requires and the perceived necessity to complete this extra work at home. Therefore, it seems that these participant SENCOS are voluntarily working beyond their contracted hours rather than doing so due to expectations set by school management. The next section provides detailed case study examples to illustrate the physical and emotional impact of the role.

6.4.2 Case Study Examples: Responsiveness, Workload, and Expectations of Self

My second interview with Jane, conducted near the end of the school year, offered a specific example that encapsulated many of the themes discussed throughout our conversation. During our meeting on Tuesday, Jane described how her week had begun:

I spent three hours on Friday night and most of Sunday catching up on emails, following up on administration that I was under serious pressure to get done, and trying to get on top of the mountain of work so I could get to grips with the new week. (Jane, interview two)

When asked about this "administration," Jane explained she needed to write end-of-term IEPs for 20 students, create teacher aide timetables to ensure all students needing in-class support were covered, and to prepare the paperwork for students needing SAC. All of this was on top of her daily administration, which included responding to emails and phone calls. Jane explained that she believes it is a "necessity" to work through her weekend so she does

not start the new week already behind on work from the previous week. Explaining that this work on the weekend had already left her “exhausted” on Monday morning, Jane said she felt proud of her attempts to create a to-do list to start the week and felt excited to start the week with “one foot forward.” However, Jane’s attempts to organise her week were soon disrupted by a student who arrived at school distressed and unable to go to class. This was soon followed by two students who were removed from their classes, a new student who had been sent to her for testing, a sick teacher aide for whom she urgently needed to provide cover, and a Ministry meeting planned for 10.30 a.m., which was now impossible due to the students under her care. Concluding her example, Jane stated that she finished the day exhausted and in tears, and not only had she not completed anything on her to-do list, but she now had an even longer to-do list to complete and felt compelled to work through her evening at home.

At our third interview, Kim detailed a similar experience, highlighting the necessary flexibility of the role and showcasing why, when issues arise, it can be so difficult for SENCOs to make time for their other supporting responsibilities, such as teaching loads and playground duty. Kim detailed an incident where student needs completely disrupted her plans for the day:

One of your students is asked to leave class, and suddenly your free period has gone. Then you might end up with two or three students who have been asked to leave class or have become distressed and have asked to leave. So there goes the to-do list for that period. And that’s what management doesn't see. How can you get anything done when you suddenly have a group of upset teenagers to look after for the period? And that happens almost every period. (Kim, interview three)

Kim’s example provides some understanding of the impact of these unexpected demands on a SENCO’s workload. Kim’s quote also mentions that there are aspects of the role that management “doesn’t see.” This raises questions about what principals/school management teams understand the SENCO role to be. The school leadership’s understanding of the SENCO role is examined further in Chapter Eight.

6.4.2 Case Study Examples: Emotional Toll, Guilt and Personal Sense of Responsibility

While Jane's and Kim's examples provide a look into the unexpected demands of the role, Liz's example helps build a picture of the emotional toll of the role. Liz had worked alongside a student for three years. She provided context to the situation by explaining that this student had problems regulating emotions and reactions but had made significant progress over the three years. This student was Year 11 and gaining National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA; New Zealand's national secondary qualification system) credits under Liz's support in the school's learning centre. Liz explains the sudden event:

I was in a meeting at lunchtime, which is never a good idea ... I can't let go of that guilt. Anyway, while I was in this meeting, [student name] hit a student on the school grounds, and literally, 20 minutes later, they were standing him down! Luckily, someone ran into my meeting and told me so I could run over to the office and try to calm the situation down. But it's a perfect example to show that I had worked so incredibly hard with this student over three years, and he's made such huge progress; then, in 20 minutes, literally the blink of my eye, because I wasn't there, he was in trouble and being stood down—all of that hard work taken away in two seconds. I still feel sick about this. (Liz, interview two)

The "hard work" Liz referred to was building a relationship with the student in which the student felt a sense of belonging and self-confidence. Liz's expression of guilt relates to not being available for her student when the emergency arose. Liz's example suggests a necessity for SENCOs to be always available for students in order to advocate for them and to de-escalate situations. In this example, Liz blames herself, stating that she now does not believe she can take any breaks because of the need to be always available for her students.

Kim also expressed guilt when not physically present to advocate for her students. Kim detailed an incident in which one of her students swore at a teacher and "before you know it, they're talking about standing them down because we have a black and white rule about verbal abuse." Kim explained she was trying to integrate this student into the mainstream. However, Kim believes this integration can be difficult in a mainstream school in which there

are structured rules that do not necessarily take additional educational needs into consideration. Kim spoke openly about the years she had spent building a relationship with this student, advocating for them, then “the guilt I feel for him being suspended is huge. I should have been there.”

Kim and the other two participants believed that they were responsible for advocating for their students and being a voice for students. There was a sense of personal responsibility and a belief they could “fix” things. All three SENCOs indicated feelings of guilt for not fulfilling the parts of the role they deemed important. Feelings of guilt appeared to affect job satisfaction with both Jane and Kim stating that the guilt makes them feel as if they should not be in this role. Jane felt “guilt about not giving my all to the role.” Kim described feelings of guilt around not having the time to fulfil all aspects of the SENCO role: “although I love this job, it comes with a sense of constant guilt that will never go away.” As Jane explained, “I constantly feel guilty that I’m not doing this role to the best of my abilities, and that makes me never feel good enough in this role.”

The feelings of guilt appear to come from a sense of responsibility or irreplaceability: that as an individual they can go some way to “fix” things and, if they are not there, students will be negatively impacted. Throughout the nine interviews, there were repeated mentions of the belief that individuals needed to always be available to students or they would feel personally responsible. As seen in the examples of Kim and Jane in the previous paragraph, two participants berated themselves for not being available when students needed them, believing that if they had been there, things may have gone differently. These two examples were only a small sample of the many times that participants mentioned a personal sense of responsibility for being available—a sense of irreplaceability. Other examples discussed the belief that, by being available, they can prevent emergencies. This is a heavy emotional toll for individuals to carry and one that I explore later in Chapter Eight.

These real examples of SENCOs’ days reveal the extensive workload, the necessity to be responsive to student needs, and the emotional toll of the role. These examples provide an insight into the perceived necessity for SENCOs to be flexible and available to students, often to the detriment of other responsibilities and their own health and wellbeing.

6.5 Job Satisfaction

When asked to detail what gives individuals the greatest sense of job satisfaction in this role, the answers overwhelmingly came back to the students. For SENCO participants, job satisfaction comes from watching students progress and achieve their goals. Kim elaborated on this sense of satisfaction from observing a student achieve something:

To see that smile when they accomplish whatever—to see and feel that they know that they're accepted for who they are, not what they are. When they've achieved and got a tiny step, it's not a tiny step to them—to us, it is, but to them, it's a huge step. You know, like getting students to go physically into the classroom is a huge step for them. I don't think some teachers acknowledge that. (Kim, interview one)

Jane acknowledged that seeing her students rewarded for their progress gives her the greatest sense of job satisfaction. She explained that it makes it “all worth it” to see students with additional learning needs acknowledged for their progress. Jane explained, “knowing the students I work with have got success like [name] is getting a prize at prizegiving! [name] is ORS funded and is also getting a prize at prizegiving.” Liz provided a similar example, explaining that what gives her the greatest sense of job satisfaction is watching the small progress her students can make:

You see development. You see the students getting that success. And it may be just that they can answer a question. It may be just that they can go into a class for five minutes. It's when you have those little steps that create a big step. (Liz, interview one).

These small steps in student progress were the most frequently acknowledged reason for feeling a sense of job satisfaction.

A sense of value was the second-most-common reason for feelings of job satisfaction or, conversely, not feeling satisfied in the role. All three case study participants emphasised how important it is to feel acknowledged and valued in the role. As Jane explained, “I know

the students appreciate me, I know the teachers appreciate me, and I know the whānau do. And that allows me to go home at night knowing I'm doing a good job." Liz shared similar views, explaining that she knows how much the students appreciate her, which helps her "show up every day."

A sense of being valued in the role was expressed as vital for remaining in the SENCO role or, unfortunately, as in Kim's case, stating, "I don't feel valued, I don't feel like people appreciate what I'm doing. And that's why I have chosen to leave." A sense of not feeling acknowledged and understood can lead to dissatisfaction in the SENCO position. The consequences of these feelings are discussed further in the final section (Section 6.6), where I explore career decisions SENCOs had made after the final interview.

6.6 Where to Next for Participants?

By the conclusion of this research study, two case study participants had chosen to leave the SENCO role. Jane has decided to step back from her SENCO role and hold an administrative position full time within the school. Jane was struggling with what she described as "too many hats. I go home at the end of the day, and I'm absolutely exhausted." When asked to elaborate on this, Jane described her view that the SENCO position should be a full-time position on its own. Currently, the pressures of the SENCO role were leaving little time for her other responsibilities. Although Jane expressed relief about resigning from the SENCO position, she also expressed guilt for leaving her students. In the third interview, Jane elaborated on these feelings of guilt: "I feel a huge amount of guilt for leaving the students that need me, and I'm not sure where in the school they can go to for support now." Jane commented that school management had decided to replace her role but with fewer hours. Jane explained, "it's a budget decision, simple as that. Fewer funded students mean less money for the role. Plus, I don't think management really understood what I did or how many students I supported, which is possibly a fault on my part." During each of our three interviews, Jane commented on experiencing high levels of stress and feeling undervalued, primarily because she did not believe her school management team acknowledged or understood what she did or the importance of her role. These feelings of not being valued ultimately led to Jane's decision to step back from the SENCO position.

Kim has also decided to leave the SENCO role. During our third interview, Kim informed me that the challenges of this role had become too much, and she had decided to leave the position to undertake formal training, studying towards a Bachelor of Teaching. Kim was excited about gaining this formal qualification as more opportunities in education would be available to her. Most of the interview discussion around Kim's reasons for resigning was requested to be "off the record." However, she was prepared to comment on the impact of relationships on her role and how relationships also contributed to her difficult decision to resign from this role: "Relationships have been my lifeline and what has given me support in this role. Unfortunately, a relationship has also broken this role for me, and I can no longer work with this person." For Kim, the breakdown of a relationship led to her difficult decision to leave the SENCO career.

Liz, the final participant, intends to remain in the SENCO/LSC position full time as she believes this role works well for her. She mentioned several times her gratitude at being allowed to hold these roles full time and for the support given by her school. Liz stated, "I'm so lucky at my school because I'm given the support and resources I need. I know lots of other SENCOs are leaving, and I don't blame them. They're not given the help or the time they need". Liz's comment indicates the important role of management for SENCOs. While Liz is the only remaining SENCO in this position, her interview comments indicated she is very aware of the challenges and difficulties facing SENCOs in other secondary schools and has concerns for the future of SENCOs in New Zealand.

6.7 Chapter Summary

Chapter Six has examined the nature of the SENCO role along with the participating SENCOs' perceptions and experiences, drawing on insights from the case study interviews. Although there are no formalised job descriptions for New Zealand SENCOs, this chapter has presented the expectations SENCOs place on themselves and their perceived impression to always be available and responsive to student needs. It has not been straightforward to compile a job description for the SENCO role due to the individual and variable nature of the role. Case study participants' experiences highlighted the most time-consuming aspects of

the role, namely administration, meetings, student support, and managing teacher aides. Examples of the SENCO role enacted have provided an insight into the responsive nature of the role, and the perception that SENCOs must forgo their own time to be readily available and to fulfil all aspects of the role that often extend past their contracted hours. Examples provided within this chapter illustrate the high expectations SENCOs place on themselves, including a significant sense of personal responsibility for their students' wellbeing and success. Case study participants documented a role that includes a heavy physical and emotional toll as well as an impact on their life outside work.

Examining these key case study findings, one of the most common discussion points was the importance of relationships. The SENCO role has been recognised by case study participants as being highly relational, relying on four key relationships with students, teacher aides, management, and other professionals. SENCOs in this case study have suggested that the strengths or weaknesses of these relationships can have an impact on the individual SENCO's ability to fulfil the role, and the sense of being valued and satisfied in the role. Identifying the significance of these relationships to the SENCO role, the next chapter, Chapter Seven, is dedicated to presenting the case study data relating to the relational nature of the SENCO role.

Chapter Seven: Findings: The Relational Nature of the SENCO Role

No one tells you that you will have to work this job out on your own. I had to be brave and find other SENCOs to talk to and reach out to people and ask for help. It's been those people who have taught me this job and other SENCOs and RTLBs who have helped when I have no idea what I'm doing. If you're not the kind of person who can build relationships, you will be very lost and alone in this role.

—Jane, case study participant, December 2020

A key theme that emerged across all nine case study interviews was the strong emphasis on the relational aspects of the SENCO role, highlighting the essential need to build and maintain relationships to effectively carry out the various responsibilities. In all nine interviews, SENCOs frequently spoke about the strengths (or weaknesses) in the key relationships that supported them, and participants consistently referred to relationships as the key aspect underpinning their feeling of preparedness and satisfaction. Despite the prominence of this theme throughout my study, I was surprised by the limited attention given to the relational nature of the SENCO role in the existing research literature.

One key aspect of SENCO work is the necessity to engage with relational agency with individuals and organisations to enact agency and create positive outcomes for students. Despite the prevalence of relational agency in participants' work, and the reported impact of these relationships on SENCO individuals, I was only able to find a few research studies that examined agency or relationships for SENCOs. In the English research literature, I was unable to find any studies that specifically addressed relationships within the SENCO role, although there was an acknowledgement by researchers of the relational nature of SENCO practice, including the fact that the SENCO role is a sociocultural practice (Bell, 2011) and an acknowledgement of relational practice in the role (Pearson, 2018; Tissot, 2013). The importance of these professional collaborations within the SENCO role has not yet been highlighted in New Zealand research literature. Lin (2020) identified the presence of relationships in fulfilling the role, finding evidence that SENCOs frequently turn to colleagues and other professionals for advice, however, Lin argues that more research was needed in this area.

Agency across these relationships was considered a key component of successful role outcomes. When SENCOs reported a strong relationship and agency with individuals/organisations, SENCOs felt better equipped to undertake their roles. When these relationships were thought to be lacking (or nonexistent), SENCOs struggled with task aspects within their roles and with feeling prepared and satisfied. Jane's quote in the epigraph highlights the apparent importance of relationships in the SENCO role. Jane states that she had to use her own contacts and form relationships to help support her in the SENCO role, and, without these relationships, she would have been "lost and alone."

An analysis of the findings identified five types of relationships in which SENCOs are involved:

1. Support and advocacy with students and whānau;
2. SENCOs as team leaders;
3. SENCOs as employees;
4. Professional collaboration; and
5. Policymakers.

Edwards' (2017) theory of relational agency argues that there is importance in forming relationships to solve complex problems. In the application of this theory to my research, the "complex problem" is the student at the centre, requiring relationships to be built with a team of people to create successful outcomes for the student. A key component of relational agency is the essence of agency (Edwards, 2017). For SENCOs, this agency is seen as enacting expertise by utilising the knowledge of other professionals. All relationship members work collaboratively for what collectively "matters" (Duhn et al., 2016; Edwards, 2017), providing appropriate support to students with diverse educational needs. Successful SENCOs utilise their relationships to make sense of the role and gain the resources/support needed for the best outcomes for students. For New Zealand SENCOs, this also involves culturally relational educational theory, championed by the work of Bishop and Berryman (Bishop, 2003, 2019; Bishop & Berryman, 2006, 2009). SENCOs use this culturally focused relational approach to education to hold the student at the forefront and to build a team of knowledge, resources, and expertise around them. The findings in this

chapter are viewed through relational agency as well as New Zealand's own educational research on relational practice to understand how individual SENCOs form and enact this agency across the five different categories of relationships.

This chapter (Chapter Seven) exclusively focuses on relational agency within the SENCO role. Case study findings are used to unpack the types of relationships SENCOs use in their day-to-day work, how agency is used in practice, and how these relationships support SENCOs in their roles. This chapter aims to understand the importance of these relationships, exploring these five identified types of relationships in further detail and using specific examples from SENCOs' day-to-day practice to highlight the relational agency at work in the SENCO role. This chapter begins to examine how SENCOs are supported in building relationships, the constraints and enablers they encounter, and how this agency is enacted in practice. This chapter examines the five key types of relationships identified in the study. Section 7.1 explores relationships of support and advocacy between SENCOs, students, and whānau. Section 7.2 focuses on SENCOs in their role as team leaders, while Section 7.3 considers their position as employees within the school context. Section 7.4 investigates professional collaboration with other professionals, and finally, Section 7.5 analyses SENCOs' relationships with policymakers, particularly the Ministry of Education.

7.1 Support and Advocacy with Students and Whānau

Throughout the case study interviews, there was a strong sense that relationships with students—relationships identified as requiring support—were the key relationships. As Jane summarised, “relationships with students are at the forefront of everything.” Participants described their relationship with students as primarily based on support and advocacy and involved placing the students' individual needs at the forefront of planning and decision making. The participants emphasised that the needs of each student are unique and individualised, which requires SENCOs to plan accordingly for each student, and SENCOs then draw on their relationship with their students(s) to inform individualised decision making. SENCO participants were adamant that there is no one-size-fits-all approach or “formula” to support students with additional educational needs. The level and type of support required depends on the individual student and building a relationship with them to

understand their unique circumstances and needs. SENCOs plan a supported approach by first starting with the individual student, building a relationship, then assessing the supports needed and the individuals who need to be involved in that plan. Kim best described this individualised and personalised approach:

It starts with the student. Then you go from the student to the whānau to the teacher, to whoever is involved with that student ... then you have to look at which teachers are working with that particular student. Further on from there, you get the Ministry and whatever outside agencies are involved It's a hard one to explain because it starts with that student and even the student's friends. It's completely different depending on the situation for every single student. (Kim, interview three)

Kim's quote explains how relational agency functions in practice. SENCOs start with the student at the centre, identifying the individual needs of the student. SENCOs then use agency to draw on their contacts to find those with knowledge and expertise within and outside the schools to create a team approach. SENCOs will then use agency across the team to create and implement a personalised plan for the student.

Cultivating a relationship based on support and advocacy entails more than merely forming a connection with the student. Case study participants believed that for successful agency to occur, relationship building with the wider family/whānau was key. Kim argued that it was equally as important to build a relationship with the student's family/whānau to understand the family dynamics and the student's needs. As Kim explained, "it's the knowledge of families—the knowledge of why that student is who they are. It's the knowledge of what makes them tick and what their family want for them." Kim's comment suggests that although SENCOs do focus on diverse educational needs, they are also required to have a broader understanding of students as individuals. Participants believed it was crucial to build relationships with whānau to gain trust and support that extended to the student's home life. Case study comments suggest that trust with whānau was crucial for engaging other professionals and influencing important school decisions for students, such as subject changes or accessing external support. As Kim stated, "without strong relationships with my students, I'm basically powerless. Building trust with my students and families is the key to

my role.” All three SENCOs illustrated examples of meeting families in their homes, inviting family members into the school, and regular communication with the family/whānau through phone calls and informal meetings. Building the relationship with the individual student and their family/whānau was seen as crucial to agency—to understanding the student and their needs, and planning, supporting, and advocating for the individual student.

Relationship building with students and family/whānau was important to highlight student strengths. Interview evidence highlighted the significance of SENCOs recognising a student’s strengths rather than just focusing on the learning needs. In her second interview, Kim commented, “because I always say to my kids, what’s your superpower ... You know, how can we take the walls away so that you can be your best self?”. Kim’s comment highlights the necessity for SENCOs to recognise a student’s strengths and support the student to harness these strengths. Jane believes it is important to help highlight these strengths as a form of advocacy so that other teachers and their students can recognise the strengths in students, not just weaknesses:

Teachers sometimes just look at students and see the areas in which they’re behind. But my job is to change the way these teachers see these kids because they all have gifts and talents, and it’s my job to bring those to the surface. So, we stop focusing on all the things they can’t do and start celebrating the things they can do. (Jane, interview one)

SENCOs prioritised this relationship of support and advocacy with students, believing that they were the only individuals in the school providing this recognition and encouragement to these students. This relationship of support and advocacy was seen as “crucial” as Liz suggested that these students are often “not understood by other teachers and students” and commented, “I am the only person championing for these students.” Case study participants detailed specific examples of: teachers refusing to have students in their classes, teachers sending students out of classes on a regular basis, school management refusing to deal with students, and students being bullied by other students. SENCOs portrayed a strong emotional reaction to the implied isolation and mistreatment of students

with additional educational needs, believing these examples demonstrated the importance of the relationship of support and advocacy. Jane captured the importance of being the individual to provide this backing: “Some teachers will even refuse to have them in their classes, so I need to be there as the person that advocates for them” (Jane, interview three).

I have included the term “advocacy” in this category as SENCOs commonly commented that they were advocates for their students and needed to act and speak on behalf of students, who often do not have the knowledge or capacity to advocate for themselves. For example, Jane provided an example of “speaking up” for her student during a disciplinary meeting with a senior leader due to the belief that her student did not have the level of communication skills needed to do this. Kim and Liz both provided examples of “fighting” for their students regarding decisions of class placements, and disciplinary and resourcing decisions. Both Kim and Liz believed that their students did not have the knowledge of the education system or the communication skills to advocate for themselves so relied on the relationship with the individual SENCO to advocate for their rights. Participants believed it takes a significant amount of time, with both the student and their whānau, to build a relationship with enough trust to hold this advocacy position.

Participants believed their relationships of advocacy conflicted with New Zealand’s ambitious inclusion policy. According to participants, the government-level inclusion policy places pressure on school leaders to make provisions for students with educational needs in mainstream secondary schools, which, in turn, places SENCOs under this same pressure. Participants in this study felt pressure from school management to include all students in mainstream education despite their beliefs that this may be disadvantageous to certain students. The participants argued that the current mainstream schooling systems are not yet established to support students with additional educational needs, which makes it inappropriate to have all students educated in mainstream classes. SENCO participants believed there was still a need for one-on-one, individualised support, separate accommodations and small classes, and respite for students where needed. Liz explained this belief system in more detail: “if you expect special needs kids to behave like

mainstream kids, you're setting them up to fail. We need to be more understanding and accommodating of these differences ... there's still a lot of work to be done." Kim also explained how her views conflicted with the pressures of school leadership: "My principal wants all students in the class full time, and that's detrimental to the student, that's detrimental to the other students, that's detrimental to teachers" Jane explained that when conflicted between her boss (the principal) and advocating for her students, she would choose to support her students: "I know regular classes are not always the best things for my students. I have to do what is right for the students, even if that means my boss is angry at me. My loyalty is with my students."

Jane stated she feels "torn" and "conflicted" and would appreciate the advice of other SENCOS to deal with this conflict, saying, "I really want to know what other SENCOS from other schools do in this situation because I find it so hard and feel so alone sometimes." Jane's comment was reflected in similar comments by the other two participants, who suggested that while there is pressure to include their students with additional educational needs, there is, as yet, a lack of understanding, flexibility, or systems in place to allow this to happen, resulting in participants being conflicted between the pressures of school policy and the needs of their individual students.

Advocating for individual students and providing appropriate learning supports also relies on SENCOS to build a relationship with a team of teacher aides, who will work individually with the students within classrooms. The following section (Section 7.2) details the next important relationship for SENCOS, which requires SENCOS to act in a leadership capacity.

7.2 SENCOS as Team Leaders

SENCOS are frequently expected to assume a supervisory or managerial role in relation to a team of teacher aides. Among my participants, the size of this team varied, ranging from five to fifteen teacher aides. Participants in my study explained that this is a responsibility for which they lack specific training or expertise. As Kim explained, "we're just expected to work out how to be a manager as we go along." Although participants expressed gratitude for working with teacher aides, this relationship was fraught with difficulties, including the

impermanence of contracts and the emotional strain of both roles.

According to participants, the most challenging aspect of this employment relationship stems from the temporary nature of teacher aide positions. Funding for teacher aides fluctuates and is based on the school roll, the funding attached to individual students, and management decisions. Participants explained that there are only short-term contracts for teacher aides and no guarantee of continuing their role beyond the end of their contract. Participants explained that individual funding is most commonly through the Ongoing Resource Scheme (ORS), where funding is attached to an individual student, not to the school. Therefore, as Kim explained, if a funded student leaves a school, the teacher aide assigned to that student could find their role redundant with only three weeks' notice. Jane provided another scenario: "our ORS-funded student moved from Year 10 to Year 11, and we lost all our funding in the space of one summer! I literally lost 25 hours of teacher aide funding just like that." Participants gave examples of schools experiencing roll declines, which reduced their inclusive education grant funding and, in turn, affected the number of teacher aide positions the school could fund. This job insecurity of teacher aides also places a large mental strain on these three participant SENCOS as they cannot guarantee work for their teacher aides and often must make challenging employment decisions due to the variable nature of the funding. The temporary nature of teacher aide positions seemed to significantly affect SENCOS' capacity to exercise relational agency.

Participants explained that due to the impermanence of the teacher aide role, it could be very difficult to find trained and experienced teacher aides. Jane noted that experienced teacher aides often left to find more secure employment. Kim provided an example of the resignation of one of her most experienced teacher aides as her contracted hours had dropped from 30 to 6 hours with only three weeks' notice due to a funded student leaving the school; unfortunately, the school could no longer offer those hours of employment to the teacher aide.

The temporary nature of teacher aide funding can make it difficult for SENCOS to employ suitably experienced teacher aides when needed at short notice. Liz shared an example of a student who had enrolled at her school who had been allocated 30 hours of teacher aide

funding. Liz was asked by the principal to find a trained teacher aide to work with this student with one week's notice. Liz explained that under pressure, she struggled to find an appropriately trained individual: "I just couldn't find a teacher aide who would handle his outbursts in such a short amount of time, let alone for 30 hours per week!" This left Jane to make the difficult decision to only offer half days to the student until an appropriate teacher aide could be found, stating, "I'm not sure if that's even legal, but I had to tell the family they could only bring their son for half days because that's all I could staff. I was so worried I could get in huge trouble for that, but what else could I do?" Jane highlighted times when she had felt "forced" to let her teacher aides leave the school because of reduced contracted hours, yet, one month later, due to changes in the school roll, she was suddenly allocated more funding, explaining that "I can't keep my best teacher aides. If I can't offer them the hours they need, of course they're going to leave for another school." At this point—and with very little time to recruit a new staff member—Liz felt she had no choice but to hire a teacher aide with very little experience. Liz noted that inconsistent and short-term funding, combined with the absence of formal contracts, made it challenging to establish a stable team of experienced teacher aides. As Liz explained, "I cannot keep a team of experienced teacher aides when our funding is constantly coming and going," which, in turn, Liz believed limited her department's capacity.

The other significant challenge of this employment relationship is the emotional toll of both teacher aide and SENCO roles. As highlighted throughout Chapters Five and Six, working with students with additional educational needs can be emotionally taxing and places a large emotional strain on the staff members working closely with these students. Participants spoke about the stress teacher aides face and the need to be available for these aides to speak freely, share emotions, and "vent." Liz explained that the most important part of her role is providing a weekly space for teacher aides to speak openly and share their problems with herself and other teacher aides. Without this freedom for discussion, Liz believes her teacher aides would be struggling. She explained: "the venting time I allow my teacher aides? That's actually the most crucial part of me as a leader. Because I can't let my TAs go home like that—I need to give them time to offload. It's a heavy job!" Jane and Kim shared examples of the necessary time intensity of being available for teacher aides to "offload" their feelings and frustrations. Jane provided

an example of a teacher aide needing support after a physical incident: “my teacher aide got hurt by a student. She needed the time to talk it through and unpack this. She deserved that time. So, I had to forget my afternoon plans because what’s more important is making sure my staff come back to work on Monday!” This informal support is unplanned when needs arise, occurring in addition to the scheduled weekly meetings. Therefore, not only are SENCOs experiencing their own emotional toll in the role, but they are also available for teacher aides to share their issues and concerns that carry emotional strain. Participants also believed that a successful relationship between SENCOs and teacher aides supported their team of teacher aides to be more productive and effective in meeting the needs of students and the school. All three case study participants believed that they needed to use lunchtimes and after school time to meet with teacher aides to adequately fulfil this management role.

All three case study participants identified the time needed to train and support teacher aides is not a responsibility that they have been allocated time for, nor was it appreciated by management just how much time this can take. Jane elaborated, “nothing really prepares you to manage a team of people. We’re just here to support students, then suddenly we’re given a team of people we have to train and supervise, and management just say—there you go!” Kim, who is not a trained teacher, also commented that this employer-like responsibility was a responsibility with which she was not yet familiar: “I suddenly went from being a teacher aide myself to having responsibility for the whole team!” Kim further explained that she believes she has built trust with her team by “being in their shoes as a teacher aide myself.” Kim states that knowing what the role is truly like and how hard it can be is crucial for building trust and respect with teacher aides “because how can you manage them and expect them to do this hard job day in and day out when you haven’t done it yourself?” When asked about training or preparation for the management of her team of teacher aides, Liz laughed, stating, “I barely know how to do this job myself, let alone train a team to do their jobs. We’re just working it out as we go along.”

After examining the dynamics of the employer relationship, my focus shifts to exploring SENCOs’ interactions with their own school leadership teams (SLTs). The following section

(Section 7.3) outlines the tensions and complexities SENCOs identified in working within these leadership structures.

7.3 SENCOs as Employees

According to New Zealand schools' self-managing school policy, leadership teams and boards of trustees set the direction for inclusive education in the school, plan the funding and allocation of teacher aides, and decide whether to appoint a SENCO and the contracted hours for this position (Kearney et al., 2017; Wylie, 2000). The literature indicates that, although it is often recommended that SENCOs be included on leadership teams, they are seldom regarded as full members. Consequently, their work is largely shaped by school management directives and values (Curran, 2019; Northouse, 2013; Tissot, 2013). Earlier in Chapter Five, survey data had revealed that two thirds of survey respondents did not feel supported by their SLTs. Therefore, I was curious to explore the complexities of this relationship in more detail with case study participants.

The support and involvement of the school's management team (leadership team and board of trustees) were seen as crucial factors in the successful functioning of the SENCO role by case study participants. Case study responses indicated that SENCOs with strong, supportive relationships with their leadership teams generally experienced a greater sense of value, higher job satisfaction, and felt more recognised in their roles. Liz, who was recognised as a member of the SLT and who had regular meetings with management, felt she had a voice in planning and whole-school management decisions. Liz felt "trusted by management to make decisions for the benefit of students" and experienced high levels of satisfaction in the role. Conversely, Jane and Kim, who had poor relationships with management or felt "unseen," voiced low levels of value and satisfaction. Poor relationships with management were cited by both Jane and Kim as one of the biggest factors in feeling unsatisfied in the role.

Liz, who met regularly with management, tended to value this arrangement and felt a greater sense of support. Regular meetings with management were credited with more access to funding and support, and management members having a strong sense of the

realities of the SENCO role. Liz explained, “my team actually understands what I do. So, they get it, then they support me.”

Within all three of her interviews, Liz frequently spoke about her positive, collaborative relationship with management, which she credited as having a large impact on her feelings of being valued in the role. Acknowledgement of the SENCO position at the leadership/strategic level within a school was seen by Liz as beneficial to feelings of value and efficiency in the role. Liz’s SENCO role is recognised as being part of the management team: she is invited to meetings regarding leadership-level decisions, and she is part of the board of trustees when making strategic-level decisions about inclusive education in the school. She said:

I would say I’m in a team environment, supported by our board of trustees, supported by our principal. We’re all on the same page and meet every week. I work to help support the strategic goal setting of our school as well I’m not in management, so to speak, but I’m working alongside them (Liz, interview one)

Due to Liz’s involvement at a leadership level, she indicated that it made it easier to access the finances and support she needed to carry out the strategic direction of the role: “I’ve got a budget—I can get everything I need to make this role work smoothly.” Ease of contact was a key ingredient in Liz’s relationship with school leadership. This supportive relationship allowed Liz to go directly to her principal to seek support or the answers she required. Liz’s successful relationship with school leadership involves recognition of the SENCO position at the leadership level, access to resources, and ease of contact with the leadership team. Liz spoke openly about her awareness that she was fortunate to be in a position with a supportive leadership team: “The management here are just so supportive, and it makes a massive difference to have that. And I think that if SENCOs didn’t have that positive, that banding together with their management, it would be a very challenging position.” The support the leadership team provides Liz—physically, emotionally, and in resourcing—allows Liz to more easily enact agency and leadership in her role.

Conversely, unsupportive relationships with management restrict SENCO agency.

Unsupportive relationships with school leadership became one of the more emotionally laden topics of conversation for the other case study respondents, demonstrating the potential consequences for SENCOs not feeling supported by management and restricted in their capabilities. Jane and Kim, who infrequently met with management (or never at all), tended to feel a lack of value or appreciation for their work. These two participants questioned whether management knew what they did or what their role entailed with Jane stating, "I don't think my leadership team have a clue what I actually do" and Kim believing she was "invisible." Jane and Kim perceived it more difficult to access additional resources or further funding for the SENCO area due to the lack of support or understanding from management. Jane and Kim's SENCO roles were not included as part of the leadership team, and there was little to no contact or communication with the board of trustees. Jane commented that she reports to her deputy principal (DP) once per term, but, otherwise, "I'm pretty much left to my own devices. And to get support or help you have to seek it. It doesn't come to you." She elaborated on this comment, stating that rather than appreciating the autonomy of her role, Jane felt "alone" and wished she had a more hands-on management team to support her.

Kim reminisced about a positive working relationship with a DP in the past, with whom she felt supported and valued. Unfortunately, since this DP had left the school, Kim is feeling unsupported and unsure where to go to seek help: "I was grieving my DP, who was just like my rock. Because she left—and no one replaced that role—and I was like, what do I do now?" Unfortunately for Kim, the new DP did not provide the support that the previous DP had provided, leaving Kim feeling uncertain in her role. This example suggests the level of isolation and frustration some SENCOs may feel without a member of the leadership team who understands and supports the role.

Participant interview comments suggested that some school leadership teams do not understand what the SENCO role entails, leading to participants feeling unappreciated. Jane believes that, due to the autonomous nature of her role and the fact that a large portion of her role is confidential, her school management team were unaware of what she did in her SENCO role. Jane believed she was not "seen" by her management team, believing that her

principal had no idea what she did in her role and was not aware of the complexities of the role or how hard she works. Jane said she thought this was because leadership were “too busy” themselves and left her unsupervised to carry out her role. Kim provided a similar comment, voicing a belief that she is left to work autonomously because her leadership team are too busy. As Kim explained, “my principal and the SLT are so busy, I think they’re just happy that I’m over here getting my job done. Maybe it’s out of sight out of mind? I feel like as long as I’m taking care of ‘those’ kids, it’s one less problem for my school, so they just leave me to it.” Ultimately, Kim was left with the perception that her leadership team do not understand or value what she does.

For Jane and Kim, difficulties with the management team and feelings of not being supported by the leadership team were the primary reasons for leaving the SENCO career. For these two participants, the value they place on feeling acknowledged by management was deemed extremely important to feelings of being valued in the role. As Kim explained, “I think it’s the appreciation that’s so important—it’s not acknowledgement, it’s the appreciation that what you do is worthwhile.” The participant examples throughout this Section 7.3 exemplify the vital importance the relationship with school management teams have on participants’ sense of value, recognition, and support. The quality of the relationship with school management—and whether relational agency was present—emerged as a key factor influencing participants' sense of success in their roles as well as impacting outcomes.

7.4 Professional Collaboration

Edwards’ (2005) theory of relational agency states that collaborative cross-boundary relationships are used to drive positive outcomes. Viewing SENCOs through this lens of relational agency, cross-boundary professionals (resource teachers: learning and behaviour (RTLBs), learning support coordinators (LSCs), medical professionals, Ministry of Education (MOE) personnel, and health professionals) come together collaboratively to create successful outcomes for students. Case study participants provided many examples of engaging relational agency with other individuals and organisations, internal and external to their school communities. Professionals within the MOE and health organisations can help SENCOs access funding for resources and teacher aides, support programmes, software, and

knowledge and training. Case study participants often commented on building relationships with SENCOs in other schools, RTLBs, and educational and health professionals in their areas to enact agency to provide the right network of support for students.

Participants believed a requirement of the SENCO position is to build and maintain relationships of professional collaboration with other individuals/agencies—outside of the school—who can provide support to students with diverse education needs. Therefore, not only do SENCOs have to build strong relationships inside the school (with students, teachers, management, teacher aides, and parents/whānau) but also relationships outside the school. Meeting with these other professionals and agencies was considered a very regular event by SENCO participants, who stated that they are required to contact other professionals, on average, daily. All three case study participants believed that building professional interagency relationships was one of the keys to their success in the role and could take up the most time. As Liz stated, “working with other professionals and agencies, it’s huge. Aside from working with students, it’s by far the biggest part of my role.” Liz believes that these relationships give her the resources and knowledge she needs to carry out all tasks of her role and, without these relationships, she would be underresourced and have less knowledge. Therefore, even though it is “huge,” taking the time to build these interagency relationships is key for Liz to help her fulfil all parts of the SENCO role.

Jane also believes interagency relationships are essential for accessing resourcing. Jane elaborated further on the importance of these relationships with other professionals:

Building contacts and connections is massive. It’s really important to make those connections with those people. You know, you’ve got your assistive technology people, your Ministry people, your RTLB—and, if you get in with the right people, you can say I need this, or can you help me with this? It’s super important. (Jane, interview one)

Liz commented on the importance of working with other agencies, particularly in a small town, to create the best results for students. Liz attends a monthly panel, bringing together agencies from across the town, including social workers, mental health professionals,

occupational therapists, the RTLB, the police, and staff from the school. She said, “It brings the community together. We don’t have a huge lot of resources, but we’re a very tight community ... It’s really important that these relationships are formed within all sectors of our community.” Liz feels supported by professionals working collaboratively on what “matters” and engaging relational agency to create successful outcomes.

The findings suggest that relationships of professional collaboration rely on the initiative of the individual SENCO. While all three participants had a sense of the importance of building these relationships to access supports, resources, and information, there was a sense shared by all three participants that the onus was on the SENCO themselves to build this relationship. As explained by Jane, “if you’re not the kind of person who can build relationships, you will be very lost and alone in this role.” Kim explained that she is grateful that she is confident in building relationships, which has been key to her success in this role. Jane stated that while she has learned to build relationships throughout her career, the lack of these relationships in the early years of the role left her “feeling alone and completely clueless about what I was supposed to do.” Within our second interview, when commenting on the importance of relationships in this role, Kim recognised that it was her personal characteristics that allowed her to build relationships and proactively gain the support she needed: “I’ll get support whether they like it or not because I’m really good at asking for that support.”

Overall, there was an understanding by all participants that there is a heavy reliance on the personal characteristics of SENCOs to have the confidence to build relationships and engage in relational agency with other individuals and organisations. The onus appears to be on individual SENCOs to build these relationships rather than school management or the MOE accessing this resourcing on behalf of SENCOs. From interview comments, it is unknown whether school management realises the time and effort SENCOs are undertaking to build these connections and enact this relational agency.

The introduction of the new learning support coordinator (LSC) position has had a considerable impact on all three SENCO participants, and the relationship between these

two roles was a recurring topic of discussion in the interviews. Added to this complexity was the fact that some LSCs had been based in the same school as existing SENCOs whereas other LSCs were based off site supporting a community of schools. While the survey asked one question specifically about how this new LSC role may have impacted the SENCO position (see Appendix A question 9), the topic of the LSC position was voluntarily raised by participants in all nine interviews, suggesting the implementation of this new role was on their minds. Points these SENCOs raised about the complexities of the relationship with LSCs included structural arrangements in the school introducing an LSC, role specifications and boundaries to responsibilities, implications for relationships and communication, and feelings of being valued.

Participants discussed structural arrangements within a school introducing an LSC position and the potential issues. The three SENCOs had very different experiences of how the LSC position could be incorporated by secondary schools in relation to the existing structure of SENCO roles. In Liz's situation, the management decided to use the new LSC position to combine the LSC and SENCO roles into one full-time position. At the start of the case study research, Liz held the position of SENCO (0.5 full-time equivalent [FTE]). However, over the following eight months, her position had officially changed to a combined role of SENCO and LSC—0.5 FTEs for each role. Liz was enthusiastic about how these roles could work alongside and complement each other.

On the other hand, Jane and Kim remained in their current SENCO roles with little change to their SENCO positions while working alongside the newly appointed LSCs. Both SENCOs spent much of our interview time commenting on the perceived negative effects of this new LSC position on their SENCO roles and their feeling of being undervalued in the process by school leadership. Jane and Kim frequently highlighted concerns about blurred boundaries and confusion around role definitions when examining the relationship between SENCOs and LSCs. They felt that the absence of clear job descriptions for each role was leading to overlapping responsibilities, duplication of effort, and uncertainty about who was accountable for what. Jane believed there was no difference when asked to explain the difference between the SENCO and LSC roles: "They are doing my role." Responding to a similar question, Kim stated that it has been a difficult process to uncover what the LSC

position is and how her role sits alongside this: “I didn’t know what was happening. So I had to really push and fight for someone to sit down with me and explain what I should be doing in my job and what’s actually in the LSC job description.” The comments from these participants indicate the level of confusion being caused by a lack of clear job descriptions for both roles as well as a lack of communication and, therefore, agency from school leadership and the Ministry of Education.

This confusion or doubling up of roles was experienced in the relationships with parents/whānau and primary school teachers. The SENCOs in my study believed that they are, and should be, the main point of contact for parents/whānau for students with additional learning needs. However, in some cases, LSCs have taken on this point of contact role. Kim stated that both she and the LSC are trying to form relationships with parents/whānau and primary teachers, which is problematic and can lead to confusion and frustration. Kim provided an example in which she contacted a family to update and request a meeting, only to discover that the LSC had already contacted the family regarding the same matter. Jane found that information from the family was often passed onto the LSC, which she only discovered when contacting the family to gather this same information:

I phoned a family to ask them to come in for a meeting to discuss plans for their daughter transitioning to high school, and sheesh, did I have egg on my face! The family told me the LSC had been in contact with them a few days before to organise that, and why was I ringing? I admit I hung up and cried. I felt so embarrassed and so lost—I mean, if that was the main point of my job, what the heck was I good for now? (Jane, interview two)

Confusion over responsibilities and a perception of hierarchy has caused feelings of resentment and inferiority for some participants. Both Jane and Kim stated that they believe the LSC role is seen as being superior to their SENCO role and that they are given fewer resources and recognition than the LSCs. The participants also commented on the inequity with pay, believing that LSCs are being paid significantly more than SENCOs. Kim further stated that the relationship between herself and the LSC felt like a hierarchy—one where she felt undervalued and not heard by the LSC. Kim stated that she now feels “inferior,” and

Jane stated the new LSC had made her role feel “redundant.” Jane questioned, “what is my role now?” and that “all the good parts of my job have gone.” Unfortunately, for both Jane and Kim, the problematic relationship with the LSCs has been one reason they have decided to leave the SENCO role; this was discussed in an analysis of job satisfaction and next steps for participants (see Sections 6.5 and 6.6).

All three participants stated that the success of the SENCO/LSC relationship depends on communication and agency between the two individuals. Liz believes that the LSC role has huge potential if the relationship between a SENCO and LSC works well. Both Jane and Liz stated that they could envision that the LSC position could support the SENCO role. Still, it is very much dependent on the individual personalities and how the two individuals work together. However, the dependency on the individual relationship between SENCO and LSC is crucial to making this professional relationship work. As I argue in the final chapter (Chapter Eight), school leaders and policymakers can support the relationship of SENCOs and LSCs through clear communication, defined role descriptors, and support of meetings of collaboration.

7.5 Policymakers (Ministry of Education)

The fifth relationship that influences the role of SENCOs is with policymakers—in this case, the Ministry of Education. This is a different kind of relationship than the others as it does not consist of personal relationships or two-way communication but involves SENCOs as receivers of information and communication from government-level decision-makers. Changes to inclusive education resourcing and policies, made at the government level, have a direct impact on SENCOs. The agency of this relationship is dependent on clear communication and collaboration.

Participants gave a sense that there is a lack of agency with the MOE, caused by barriers to communication. All three case study participants argue that an apparent lack of communication from the Ministry about changes in directions for inclusive education resourcing has caused stress for these participant SENCOs. From conversations with case study participants, it appears that SENCOs were not consulted about this new provisioning,

and school leaders did not communicate this change or reassure SENCOs about these changes. In the words of Kim:

I vividly remember watching the news one night, seeing these new LSC positions explained, and I was so shocked, I burst into tears and spent the whole night stressing how we could afford to live. I was convinced I was being kicked out of my job. I couldn't believe that the Ministry wouldn't warn me about these changes. I had to learn about this by seeing the news! (Kim, interview three)

Jane shared similar sentiments about the lack of information or communication and the stress this caused: "after twenty years in education, I'm really appalled at how this was communicated to us." Liz also felt a sense of being let down by the relationship with the Ministry and that this change had not been openly communicated to SENCOs.

SENCO participants discussed the relational agency they wished they had with the Ministry, including: more regular communication, Ministry-organised professional learning and development (PLD) and networking events, and more recognition from the Ministry. Participants stated that communication from the MOE is "few and far between" (Liz). Kim believes that during her three years in the role, she is yet to receive any MOE-level communication regarding her role or responsibilities. Jane also commented that she wished the MOE would communicate more regularly around the expectations of SENCOs. Case study participants felt that the Ministry of Education should address the lack of community and networking opportunities available to SENCOs. They suggested that Ministry-organised events could help SENCOs feel more connected in their roles and better able to engage in professional collaboration.

Lastly, all three participants mentioned a perceived lack of recognition and understanding from the MOE. Jane commented: "the Ministry wouldn't have a clue what I do" with similar opinions being echoed in the interview comments of Jane and Liz. Liz discussed that while she appreciates the autonomy given to her by school leadership to oversee the SENCO role, MOE-level recognition and guidance is lacking: "But do the Ministry really know what a SENCO does?... Schools should not be left in the dark trying to work it all out with no

guidelines at all.” Liz’s comment suggests that more guidance from the Ministry would assist her in enacting this role, particularly by providing some guidelines. Comments from participants throughout the nine interviews suggested that they wanted more guidance from policymakers (the Ministry of Education) with the ability to work autonomously to adjust the role to meet the needs of the individual school. Currently, case study participants gave a sense that there is too much flexibility and autonomy in the role, and more guidance and nationwide regulation of the role would be appreciated. To summarise, currently, there are agency issues with the Ministry of Education. The MOE, as the primary policymaker for SENCOs, is perceived by participants as inaccessible with barriers impeding clear and effective communication.

7.6 Chapter Summary

Analysis of the case study interview data revealed five key areas in which SENCOs are required to exercise relational agency: support of students and whānau, team leadership, school management, professional collaboration, and engagement with policymakers. Successful agency in each of these five relationship areas has shown to significantly support SENCOs in their work and lead to more successful outcomes. Conversely, a lack of agency in any of these five relationships can hinder the SENCO role and lead to feelings of isolation and being undervalued as well as lack of access to resources and knowledge. This chapter (Chapter Seven) has highlighted the importance of regular meetings with a SLT member, the inclusion of SENCOs in some form of leadership capacity, and the need to enhance communication with the MOE to reduce barriers to agency. Relational agency is a strong theme in New Zealand educational literature (Bishop, 2003, 2019; Bishop & Berryman, 2006, 2009); however, the significant time and effort required to foster relationships with students and whānau has yet to be formally acknowledged within SENCO role descriptions or in research literature. Participants perceived this relationship to be at the centre of their role and a key to enacting any form of agency.

Building on Edwards’ (2005) definition of relational agency as “a capacity for working with others, across practice boundaries, to strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems” (p. 31), the recognition and support of agency, through adequate time and

opportunities to build relationships, enables SENCOs to collaborate effectively with professionals across disciplines toward shared goals. In this way, responsibility for inclusive education provision does not rest solely with the SENCO but is distributed across a team of colleagues working collaboratively and purposefully. Such relational agency not only reduces the burden on the individual SENCO but also enhances outcomes for students by drawing on shared expertise, resources, and knowledge.

The findings in this chapter have highlighted two key components of successful agency: the time and support required to build relationships and the removal of barriers and constraints that limit agency. This perspective prompted further reflection on the connection between enabling relationships and addressing constraints so that agency can be more effectively supported. Participants also identified positive outcomes that emerged when barriers were removed and agency was successfully enacted. The following chapter (Chapter Eight) therefore examines the enablers of agency and the outcomes of successful agency.

The next and final chapter brings together the research literature and the results of both stages of the research, alongside the research questions, to highlight what has been learned, and what further questions and challenges these findings present. The chapter concludes by outlining the original contributions this study makes to the field of knowledge.

Chapter Eight: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

I just want people to know what we do. And appreciate it. All the hard stuff, the long hours, the stress, and tears—it would all feel worth it if people just understood what we’re trying to do.

—Jane, case study participant, March 2021

During my research, I surveyed and interviewed SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools who feel overwhelmed, forgo their personal needs, and work well beyond the contracted hours for their role by using their personal time to complete the many demands of the role. My case study participants expressed feelings of isolation and a belief that school leaders, the school community, and policymakers do not understand the realities or full extent of the SENCO role in practice. Jane commented that, although she loves her job, “I don’t think anyone actually understands what we do ...,” elaborating that the SENCO role feels “unseen” by school leaders and the wider community.

Jane’s comment in the epigraph summarises the key motivation for this research study: SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools have been, until now, largely unrecognised. SENCO experiences are missing from the research literature, and school leaders, policymakers, and SENCOs themselves have not acknowledged the heavy physical and mental toll of the SENCO role. Without recognising and addressing the pressures of this role—and valuing the individuals in these roles—the SENCO role is not sustainable. Furthermore, without a clear understanding of the current SENCO role and existing provisions, proposed changes risk being redundant or doubling up. I argue that it is essential for school leaders and policymakers to first develop a thorough awareness of what SENCOs are presently responsible for before implementing any future changes.

This chapter (Chapter Eight) concludes this thesis: a qualitative, two-stage, constructivist research study examining the experiences of Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in New Zealand secondary schools. Stage One was an electronic survey of SENCOs

in secondary schools in the North Island of New Zealand, and Stage Two consisted of a case study of three SENCOs, consisting of a total of nine semistructured interviews. I examined the characteristics of SENCOs, their perceptions and experiences, as well as how they engage relational agency in their work.

This research sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What are characteristics of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools?
2. What are the perceptions and experiences of these SENCOs of their roles?
3. How do SENCOs engage relational agency to support their work within secondary schools?

In this chapter, I analyse the findings in relation to the three research questions. Key recommendations are presented to guide employers (principals and boards of trustees) and the Ministry of Education (MOE) in making changes that support the effective functioning of individuals in the SENCO role. I also highlight my contributions to knowledge, focusing on two key dimensions of agency in SENCO relationships and three major findings related to clarity and wellbeing, supportive leadership and frameworks, and policy impacts. The chapter concludes by advocating for a reconsideration of inclusive education definitions as well as the formalisation and clarification of the SENCO role.

This final chapter opens with an exploration of SENCO characteristics, drawing conclusions about their role within New Zealand secondary schools (Section 8.1). The following three sections address the challenges faced by SENCOs in fulfilling their roles, grouped into role-related challenges (Section 8.2), organisational challenges (Section 8.3), and policy challenges (Section 8.4). Sections 8.5 and 8.6 then examine how SENCOs enact relational agency to support their work and why this concept is significant for both SENCOs and schools. In Section 8.7, I present the study's key conclusions, implications, and recommendations, outlining three major contributions to knowledge. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations (Section 8.8), directions for future research (Section 8.9), and final concluding remarks (Section 8.10).

8.1 Who are the people employed in SENCO Roles?

This section (Section 8.1) draws on research findings and relevant literature to address the first research question: what are the characteristics of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools? Survey and case study responses are analysed alongside existing research to construct a comprehensive picture of the SENCO role within this context. The analysis identifies key characteristics of SENCOs: they are mature, empathetic, and possess valued experience; they are motivated by a desire to make a meaningful difference; and their work is influenced by role instability and a lack of formalisation.

8.1.1 SENCOs are Mature, Empathetic Individuals with Valued Experience

SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools are highly experienced mature educators: this research found that most SENCOs are female, aged over 40, and hold at least ten years of SENCO experience. These findings parallel those found in the literature, stating that SENCOs are mature females with extensive working backgrounds (Collinson; 2011; Jones, 2002). Research participants stated that alongside extensive experience, it is also important to hold the personal characteristics of empathy and the ability to form and maintain relationships.

One key finding across this research is the diversity of SENCOs' prior experience and backgrounds; this experience included extensive classroom teaching experience, senior leadership experience, and experience in related fields, including social work, counselling, and youth work. These findings align with previous New Zealand research (Harrington, 2016; Kearney et al., 2017; Lin, 2020; NZEI, 2018; Storer, 2002) and international research (Rosen-Webb, 2018; Taylor, 2014), which conclude that SENCOs hold extensive prior experience and perceive this experience to be crucial for preparation for the role's demands.

In New Zealand, there is no one pathway or formalised training required to become a SENCO in a secondary school. Very few New Zealand SENCOs hold a formal qualification in inclusive education. My survey and case study participants held various qualifications and training but little or no specific qualifications in inclusive education. Across all participants, two thirds of participants held bachelor's degrees, one third held undergraduate certificates, another third held postgraduate certificates, and less than one quarter held

master's qualifications. However, the percentage of specific qualifications in inclusive education was surprisingly low with just under one quarter of participants across the study holding a specialised graduate or postgraduate qualification in inclusive education. These findings align with previous research from Kearney et al. (2017) and Storer (2002) that up to 75% of New Zealand SENCOs do not hold specific inclusive education qualifications. The lack of formal inclusive education qualifications is likely due to the MOE holding no requirement for a formal qualification for this important role. One recommendation to be made later in this chapter is to consider a formalised inclusive education qualification or certification that can be accessed by SENCOs from around New Zealand, supporting them in their work.

Only two thirds of respondents across this study held current New Zealand teacher registration, which is an interesting result, given the fact that teacher registration is compulsory for SENCOs in England (Rosen-Webb, 2011). As there are no official regulations or formal training required to be a SENCO in a New Zealand school, it is possible that school management do not see it as a necessity to employ a trained, registered teacher and perhaps consider other characteristics and training more valuable than teacher training. The absence of a formal inclusive education qualification may reflect the government's limited understanding of the responsibilities and skill sets demanded by this role.

The lack of formalised or prescribed qualifications has allowed employers (principals) to employ individuals with the experience they consider valuable in the SENCO position pertaining to the needs of the individual school. My three case study participants were all an example of this with Kim and Jane both being recruited within the school due to an ability to "build relationships with the kids." Liz was recruited due to her experience in social work and empathy for youth, stating, "although I didn't know anything about the role, the school thought my experience and empathy working with vulnerable people was more important than specific SENCO work." While the flexibility surrounding SENCO qualifications and experiences can be considered an advantage of New Zealand's self-managing school system, this same flexibility also brings several disadvantages, which are explored in this chapter (Section 8.4.2).

8.1.2 Motivated by Making a Difference and Advocacy

SENCOs are motivated to do this role due to a strong sense of “making a difference” and advocacy. Case study participants talked with a sense of pride about the difference they were making for their students. They believed they helped their students to feel safer at school, to be more confident, and to progress academically and socially. As stated by Liz, “the only thing keeping me going in this role on tough days is that my students need me and I’m making a difference to their lives.” Emotive words, such as “advocacy,” “passion,” “empathy,” “fulfilment,” and making a difference, were all listed as reasons why the participants remained in their SENCO role. The importance of advocacy in the SENCO role has also been highlighted in the research literature. Both Kearney et al. (2017) and Lin (2020) identified that advocacy was core to SENCO identity in primary school SENCOs, explaining that making a difference for students with diverse educational needs was a core reason for SENCO job satisfaction. As is argued throughout this chapter, it appears that this sense of advocacy often motivated SENCOs to accept the heavy physical and emotional toll of the role, including a commitment to round-the-clock availability.

8.1.3 Role Instability

This research has highlighted the fact that, due to a lack of formalisation or targeted funding for the role, the employment of the SENCO position is still very much at the discretion of individual schools. All three of my case study participants were working without an official job description and expressed uncertainty about what they were supposed to be doing in their roles or what other SENCOs around the country were doing. There is a lack of Ministry-level job descriptions or guidance for SENCOs in New Zealand, potentially leading to a lack of information about the SENCO role in practice (Kearney et al., 2017; Lin, 2020; Storer, 2002; Taylor, 2014). SENCOs remain an optional resource decision for individual schools (MOE, 2019). As a result, they often work without formal job descriptions, which participants noted creates a sense of instability in their roles. Furthermore, given the fact that there is no specific funding for SENCO roles (Kearney et al., 2017)—in contrast to the new targeted funding for learning support coordinator (LSC) roles (Lin, 2020)—this leaves the job stability of the SENCO role in doubt. This “doubt” or instability has already been identified in New Zealand research by Lin (2020), who argues that the lack of nationwide formalisation of the SENCO role may cause “vulnerability and instability of SENCO identity” (p. 183). This

research has supported the argument of Lin (2020), further highlighting the fears and concerns of participant SENCOs about their roles, expectations, and stability of their roles. Concerns about the SENCO role's instability led to later recommendations for formalising the position (Section 8.4.3).

8.1.4 A Representation of the SENCO Role

To conclude this section on individuals in the SENCO role, I have created a visual representation illustrating the role of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools. This depiction combines survey findings with insights from case study interviews to highlight the key responsibilities identified by research participants. Given the limited New Zealand research literature documenting the roles and responsibilities of SENCOs, particularly in secondary schools, this visual representation contributes to new knowledge by enhancing understanding of the SENCO role in this context. Figure 12 uses research findings to summarise the main roles and responsibilities of SENCOs as identified by research participants.

Figure 12:
The SENCO Role in New Zealand Secondary Schools

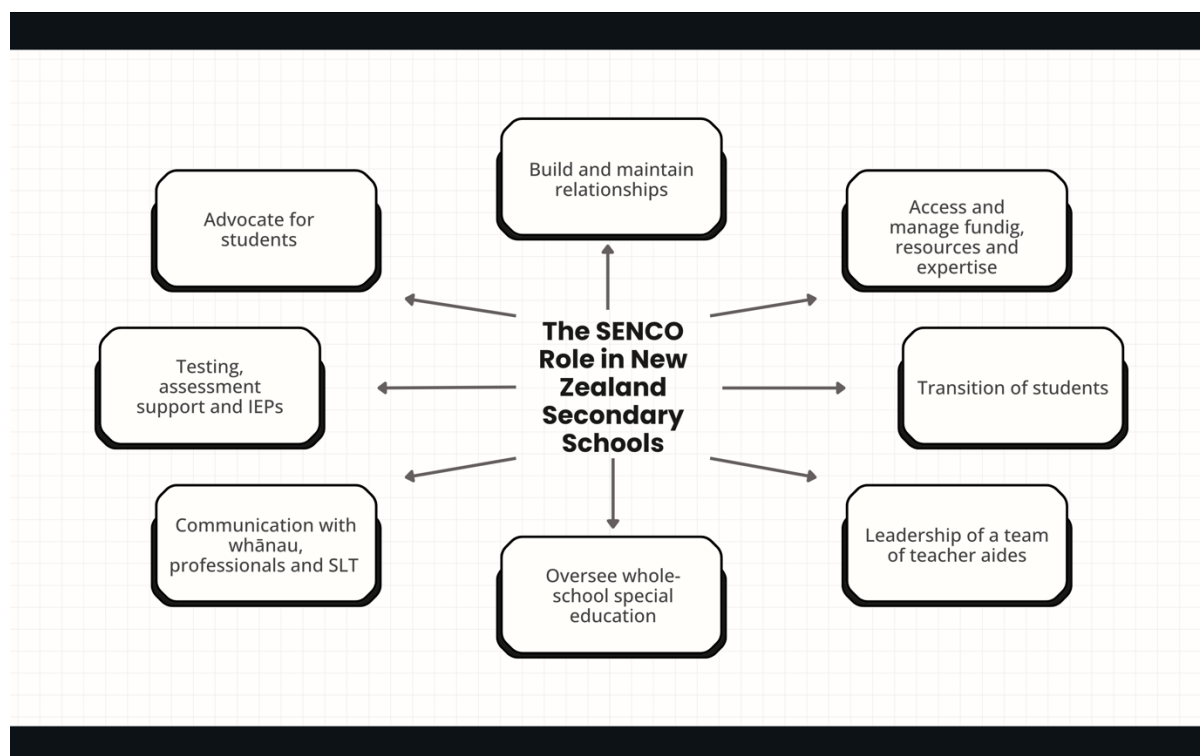
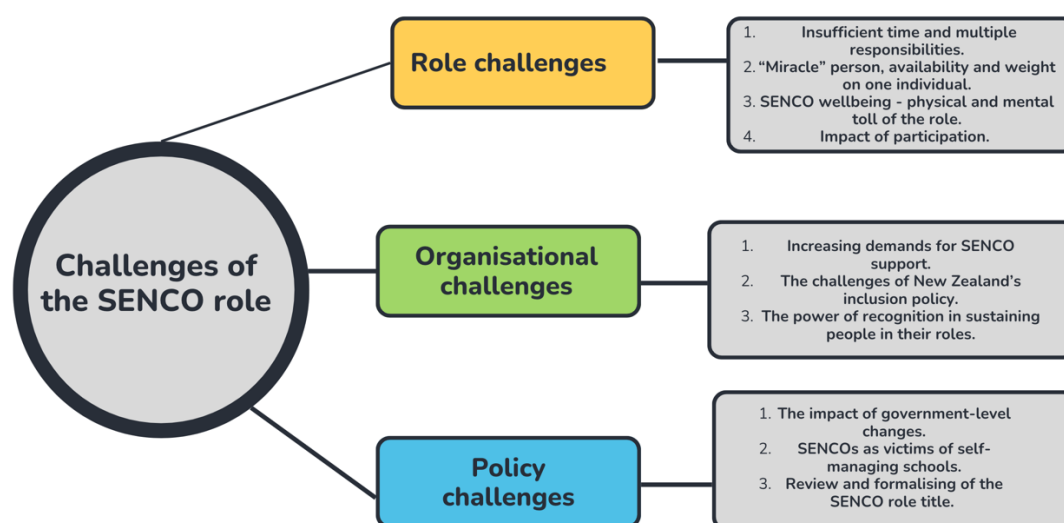


Figure 12 suggests a complex and wide remit of responsibilities for SENCOs. In New Zealand secondary schools, SENCOs are required to undertake these responsibilities within significant time constraints, and frequently with limited support or authority to implement change. The complexities of fulfilling these responsibilities, particularly when constrained by time, leadership capacity, and shifting policy contexts, are examined in detail in the following section (Section 8.2).

Findings from both the survey and case studies indicated that participants repeatedly emphasised the challenges associated with the SENCO role, which surfaced as a central theme across numerous interviews. These challenges encompassed issues such as workload, role ambiguity, limited resources, and insufficient recognition, each of which shaped participants' capacity to enact their role effectively. To enhance clarity, the findings in this section have been grouped into three areas of challenge: role challenges, organisational challenges, and policy challenges. Figure 13 displays the organisation of key findings into these three themes.

Figure 13:
Challenges of the SENCO Role Grouped by Category



The following three sections examine each of these key challenges, together with their associated sub-themes, in greater depth. Drawing upon both the research findings and relevant academic literature, these sections provide a detailed analysis of the complex factors influencing the SENCO role in New Zealand secondary schools. Specifically, Section 8.2 investigates the challenges related to the nature and scope of the SENCO role itself; Section 8.3 examines organisational challenges, including structural and systemic factors within schools; and Section 8.4 analyses policy-related challenges that shape and constrain the enactment of the SENCO role.

8.2 Role Challenges

This section explores the challenges inherent in the SENCO role itself, including insufficient time and multiple responsibilities (Section 8.2.1), the “miracle” person, availability and the weight on one person (Section 8.2.2), SENCO wellbeing - the physical and mental toll of the role (Section 8.2.3) and the impact of participation (Section 8.2.4). It draws on participants’ experiences to illustrate how these factors influence their capacity to fulfil the role effectively.

8.2.1 Insufficient Time and Multiple Responsibilities

The SENCO role extends well beyond the contracted hours of the role with both survey and case study participants consistently identifying insufficient time as the biggest challenge in the SENCO role. Participants in my study appear to have accepted that this role necessitates work completed outside school hours to fulfil all duties of the role. Although the willingness of SENCOs to work well beyond their contracted work hours could be seen as admirable, it does raise a concern about the welfare of these individuals and the expectations our education system is, perhaps unconsciously, instilling. Wright (2002b) shared similar concerns about the willingness of educators in her study to work above and beyond the expectations of the role due to the core belief that they were making a difference. As with the heads of department in Wright’s (2002a; 2022b) research, the participants in my study explained the satisfaction of making a difference in students’ lives as the reason for accepting this overload. Wright questioned how long this could be sustained: “The goodwill

teachers have shown in the past may be wearing thin, if making a difference to students is no longer reward enough” (p. 140). The results of Wright’s (2002a) head of department study and the similar results of this study led me to question whether New Zealand SENCOs are expected to accept overload and forgo their own needs due to the needs of students. The “goodwill” of SENCOs to accept a physically and emotionally demanding role is a reality that, I believe, has gone unacknowledged by school leaders and policymakers and puts the long-term sustainability of the SENCO role at risk.

New Zealand SENCOs are expected to hold multiple positions of responsibility in a secondary school in addition to the SENCO role. Less than one quarter of my survey and case study participants held a dedicated full-time SENCO role. This research, alongside the research literature, confirms that in both England and New Zealand, expecting SENCOs to hold multiple roles alongside the SENCO role is commonplace (Collinson, 2011; Lin, 2020; NZEI, 2018; Pearson, 2008; Rosen-Webb, 2011).

Concerns about wearing “multiple hats” (Liz) and balancing diverse responsibilities were common themes amongst case study participants. The findings of this research study can also be seen in the research of Smith and Broomhead (2019), who take this argument further, suggesting that the expectation for SENCOs to hold multiple responsibilities results in the SENCO role becoming an additional responsibility and, therefore, “by default, the role becomes an ‘extra’ responsibility” (p. 56). In the case of my SENCO participants, due to juggling multiple responsibilities, the “extra” SENCO responsibility necessitated the need to complete the responsibilities of their SENCO role during evenings and weekends.

Holding multiple responsibilities has been identified as a “threat” to SENCO identity (Lin, 2020; Rosen-Webb, 2011) as well as a contribution to feeling overwhelmed and a heavy workload (Pearson, 2008; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Smith & Broomhead, 2019). This leads me to question whether this expectation is recognised by school leaders and the MOE. Alternatively, is this an unwritten expectation by school leaders and SENCOs themselves or an unexamined reality of busy schools? I argue later in Section 8.4.3 that a formalising of SENCO roles, alongside targeted funding for this role, could help protect the

SENCO time and identity, ideally reducing the expectation to hold multiple responsibilities.

8.2.2 The “Miracle” Person, Availability, and the Weight on One Individual

SENCOs believe they need to demonstrate round-the-clock availability, which includes forgoing individual needs, to prevent crises and respond to student and school needs. These “needs” included “putting out fires” and “picking up the pieces.” However, these needs are accompanied by a belief that SENCOs must always be available, assuming the school would “fall apart” in the absence of the SENCO individual. There was a perception from participants that they were the only individual in the school providing this support to students and, in their absence, students would be negatively impacted.

This leads to a more consequential issue: SENCOs described themselves as the “miracle person”, the “fix it” person, who can “do it all”—an expectation they felt from school management, teachers, and parents. These participants often worked in isolation in the role and were expected to “know all and be all” (Liz). However, when I questioned these perceived beliefs further, I could not find any evidence that this was an explicit expectation from management but, rather, an unexamined reality of busy schools or an expectation SENCOs place on themselves.

The experiences of these participants suggests that whole-school responsibility for inclusive education is invested in one individual in one position: the SENCO role. When compared with existing research, the literature indicates that SENCOs often feel pressured to be the experts within their schools (Rosen-Webb, 2018; Smith & Broomhead, 2019). This sense of pressure is also reflected in some New Zealand studies, which highlight the responsibility placed on sole individuals within the school (Kearney et al., 2018; NZEI, 2018). The perceived burden of this responsibility falling on a single individual leads into the next section (Section 8.2.3), which explores its effects on the wellbeing of the SENCO.

8.2.3 SENCO Wellbeing: Physical and Mental Toll of the Role

A SENCO role can be characterised by a high workload and high levels of feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. The emotional toll of the role was evident throughout this study, particularly the pressure SENCOs place on themselves to be emotionally and physically available for student and school needs. SENCOs referred to this role as a “vocation” or “lifestyle” rather than a job due to the emotional impact. Alongside the emotional toll, the physical toll on participants was highly visible with participants explaining they were “exhausted” and “make the ultimate sacrifice so my students can succeed” (Kim). The common themes were related to emotional care and personal sacrifices.

The SENCO role appears to constitute significant feelings of guilt. Rather than acknowledging the time demands of this role as an external issue or something that needed addressing with management, participants held a sense of guilt for not being able to fulfil the role as they believed they should. The biggest source of guilt appeared to be a sense that they were not providing enough support to individual students. Another source of guilt was feeling conflicted between the views of management, such as inclusion within the mainstream classroom, and the needs of individual students. SENCOs also felt guilty about the impermanence of teacher aides and the fact they could not guarantee work hours to their teacher aides.

The SENCO role experiences significant turnover with most individuals remaining in the position for fewer than five years. High turnover has been linked to the overwhelming nature of the role (Embich, 2001; NZEI, 2018). In 2018, NZEI highlighted that due to high stress levels and feelings of being overwhelmed, very few SENCOs stay in the role for more than five years—a finding supported by my research. Researchers such as Embich (2001), Pearson (2008), Smith (2002), Smith and Broomhead (2019), and Tissot (2013) have consistently argued that the demands of the SENCO role make it difficult to keep going. Similarly, New Zealand’s Education Review Office (ERO; 2010) acknowledged that the workload associated with the role is unsustainable. In response, NZEI (2018) called on schools and policymakers to formally recognise and resource the SENCO position, advocating for protected time, clear role definitions, supportive structures, appropriate training, and

consistent funding. ERO (2010) and NZEI (2018) summarised these recommendations, as shown in Table 5.

Table 4:

Recommendations to support the SENCO role, from ERO (2010) and NZEI (2018) Reports

Area	Recommendation
Time allocation	Provide formally protected time for SENCO duties
Retention	Review workload to retain experienced SENCOs
Role understanding	Clarify SENCO responsibilities across leadership
Strategic influence	Position SENCO within school governance frameworks
Support structures	Develop staffing teams (assistant SENCOs, administration help)
Funding & status	Ensure every school has a funded, designated SENCO

If these findings and recommendations were made by ERO in 2010 and again by NZEI in 2018, what is being done to mitigate the levels of stress and high workload SENCOs continue to experience today (2025)? Despite recommendations made to formalise the SENCO role, protect the role with dedicated time, and to provide leadership capacity, eight years after the most recent report of recommendations, there appears to be little consideration or work by the government to address these recommendations.

There is evidence of research highlighting the concerns for SENCO burnout, particularly in England. Embich (2010) argues that burnout is a common outcome for SENCOs, and Smith (2022) took this argument further, suggesting that persisting through these challenging, exhausting, and difficult circumstances is just what SENCOs “do,” often leading to physical and emotional exhaustion. This again questions the unexamined expectations for SENCOs: is this a pressure SENCOs place on themselves or a pressure created, unintentionally, by management? Is accepting the mental and physical exhaustion of the SENCO role just something that New Zealand SENCOs “do”? Recognising the significant emotional toll of this role and concerns for the sustainability of individuals in this role, I make recommendations to support the wellbeing of SENCOs later in this chapter (Section 8.7.1.1).

8.2.4 Impact of Participation

As this research draws to a close, I have reflected on the potential impact of participation in this study, particularly for the case study participants who contributed up to ten hours of their time over a nine-month period. The case study interviews were often emotionally charged, especially during the second and third interview phases (December 2020 and March/April 2021). Participants frequently became tearful or expressed strong feelings of guilt, frustration, and emotional exhaustion. This prompted me to consider whether SENCOs are ordinarily provided with opportunities to share their experiences and emotions related to their role, or whether participation in this research represented, for some, the first occasion on which they had been invited to do so in a reflective and supported context.

By the conclusion of the case studies, two participants had made the decision to leave their SENCO positions. This development was concerning, as I reflected on whether the process of participation—particularly the act of confronting and articulating the emotional and physical demands of the role—may have contributed, even in part, to their decision to step away. Recognising the intensity of the emotional responses observed and the considerable burden carried by these professionals, I recommend that SENCOs be provided with regular, structured opportunities for emotional support and professional reflection. Such opportunities could serve as an important preventative measure, helping to mitigate the emotional toll of the role and reduce the risk of burnout or attrition among those undertaking this vital work.

8.3 Organisational Challenges

This section examines the organisational factors that impact the SENCO role and the ways in which SENCOs are able to carry out their work in practice. It considers increasing demands for SENCO support (Section 8.3.1), the challenges of New Zealand's inclusion policy (Section 8.3.2), and the power of recognition in sustaining people in their roles (Section 8.3.3).

8.3.1 Increasing Demands for SENCO Support

The inclusive education sector is at crisis point. Chapter Two mapped an exponential rise in diverse educational needs, both internationally and in New Zealand. This rise in needs includes an increase in the proportion of students identified with an additional educational need and an increase in the number of needs identified (Carpenter, 2010; Davison, 2012; Harrington, 2016; Milne, 2019). International research has tracked this rise in the number and complexity of additional learning needs over the last decade, and researchers have predicted this trend to continue (Carpenter, 2010; NZEI, 2018; Symes, 2014). Carpenter (2010) called this a “frontier” for education—a point in education where the number of needs and the complexity of these needs have caused challenges for educators not seen before. Symes (2014) has argued that worldwide demand for inclusive education support is higher now than at any other point in education’s history. Despite an apparent rise in diverse education needs, SENCOs have not seen an accompanying increase in their contracted hours at the school level. According to the NZEI (2018) survey, 91% of New Zealand students are not receiving the support they need to succeed in mainstream schooling, and there are issues providing timely support when students are diagnosed as needing support.

SENCOs are facing a two-fold challenge at this crisis point. Firstly, the number of students under a SENCO’s care is rapidly rising. One participant spoke about the number of additional learning needs students on her school roll increasing from 30 to approximately 120 in her five years in the role. Secondly, there is the emergency and identification of increasing diverse learning needs. Participants in this study highlighted the importance of emerging knowledge about new learning needs but found it challenging to keep up with developments in inclusive education research. Liz explained, “I spend my weekends and holidays trying to catch up on all the new developments, research, and new diagnoses—it’s a full-job in itself!” All three participants commented on the need to participate in professional development and read educational literature after hours (weekends and school term holidays) to upskill themselves on the newly identified educational needs. Yet, there is

no recognition by school leaders or the MOE of how this increase in educational needs (and diversity of needs) may impact individual SENCOs.

Alongside increasing numbers and diversity of needs is the key challenge SENCOs are facing: student needs extend beyond current MOE definitions of additional education needs. All three participants agreed that the most recent definition of diverse learning needs (MOE, 2012) did not adequately incorporate the array of students they were required to support. According to participants, the MOE's definition omits students with behavioural challenges and those needing mental health support, who require significant time and support from SENCOs. Kim, Jane, and Liz all stated that students with behavioural and mental health needs comprise a large portion of the students they support. Participants documented that students with learning needs were often "lowest priority" (Liz) compared to students with challenging behaviours and mental health concerns. Jane commented that most of her days are spent supporting students with anxiety and depression, who struggle to attend mainstream classes, or who often need to come out of classes and be in the SENCO withdrawal space. Kim also spoke about the number of students with mental health concerns, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, who require her continual support. The diversity of needs was a surprising finding, particularly when considering the MOE's definition of diverse educational needs, which only recognises physical and cognitive learning needs with no mention of those students with emotional health needs. I question whether school leaders and policymakers have acknowledged this expanding definition of diverse educational needs and whether the definition needs to be updated. Currently, the MOE definition of educational needs does not encompass all needs that SENCOs are currently supporting within schools.

8.3.2 The Challenges of New Zealand's Inclusion Policy

The pressures of inclusion cause SENCOs to feel a sense of conflict between the needs of students and the demands of the school. Case study participants voiced a belief that full-time mainstream education is inappropriate for all students with additional learning needs. Chapter Two mapped the government directives of inclusion over the last few decades, proposing that New Zealand is now the most "radically inclusive" inclusive education system internationally with only 1% of students educated outside the mainstream (Hornby, 2014).

Schools are now facing a push to incorporate most students into mainstream classrooms despite only 38% of teachers feeling adequately prepared to cater to the needs of all students in conventional classrooms (Pearson, 2018). While all case study participants supported the goal of inclusion, this caused conflict when participants believed inclusion in mainstream was not appropriate for an individual student. All three case study participants shared a similar belief: that inclusion only works when it benefits the individual student.

The three case study participants agreed that inclusion in mainstream classes should be the goal but not at the expense of the student, the rest of the class, or the teacher. During interviews, they described receiving directives from school management and boards of trustees to move towards full-time inclusion of students with additional learning needs—a pressure already identified in New Zealand research (Hornby, 2014; Mitchell, 2010). Participants expressed a sense of being “stuck” between the needs of their students and the expectations of management. While they wanted to follow these directives, they felt a strong responsibility to advocate for what was best for each individual student. For all three participants, this meant recognising that students learn best when they feel safe, comfortable, and able to choose their learning environment. Previous research has similarly found that SENCOs often experience conflict between management expectations and their own professional judgments due to differing perspectives on inclusion (Clarke & Done, 2021; Kay et al., 2022).

The opposing views regarding inclusion raise questions about the needs of individual students versus school policy. Who is best placed to make these decisions regarding individual students—the SENCO individual or the school’s leadership team? The absence of SENCOs as strategic leaders has been identified by many researchers (Smith & Broomhead, 2019; Clarke & Done, 2021; Kay et al., 2022; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Smith, 2022a; Tissot, 2013). Therefore, SENCOs must navigate the different views of management, students, and whānau with their own beliefs, experience, and observations, often without a position of leadership or a recognition of leadership position within the school (Smith & Broomhead, 2019; Smith, 2022a; Tissot, 2013). This is also another reason to advocate for the inclusion of SENCOs on leadership teams where these policy and strategic decisions can be discussed, including the voice of SENCOs who are advocating for individual students.

8.3.3 The Power of Recognition in Sustaining People in their Roles

Support from the leadership team was crucial in SENCOs' feelings of value and satisfaction in the role. Those participants who identified a supportive relationship with their principal and leadership team explained that management understood the day-to-day realities of the SENCO role, checked in regularly, and included SENCOs in decision making and involvement at policy level. Two case study participants who did not feel supported by management stated that their principals and leadership teams did not understand their roles and were not actively involved. Based on her experiences and sense of lack of support, Kim argued that every principal needs to inform themselves of the role of the SENCO and suggested this should be compulsory in-service training for principals.

In practice, SENCOs cannot enact school-wide change or strategic development without the support of school management. Researchers believe that, ultimately, whole-school inclusive education coordination is in the hands of leadership teams and whether strategic-level leadership is afforded to the school's SENCO (Cowne, 1998; Smith 2022a). SENCOs are expected to be a "catalyst" for whole-school change but cannot enact this change without the support of leadership, and involvement in policy and resourcing decisions (Cowne, 1998; Liasidou & Svensson, 2014; Smith 2022a).

Despite research literature arguing for inclusion of SENCOs on leadership teams, very few New Zealand SENCOs may be included at a management level. In the survey responses, out of 17 respondents, only one respondent indicated that they had been included on the senior leadership team (SLT). Two of my case study participants reported not being involved in the leadership team and, according to participants, held no management capacity at all apart from in their own departments. According to these two participants, policy and strategic-level decisions were made in management meetings with no involvement from them as SENCOs. One of my case study participants held an active role on the leadership team and was invited to strategic meetings regarding inclusive education directions within the school. This participant indicated this involvement at a leadership level brought great satisfaction and a belief that her role was valued by leadership. This participant felt empowered to enact whole-school change whereas the other two participants felt they were only carrying out

directives of leadership with little leadership agency of their own. SENCOs in New Zealand, currently, have limited leadership ability to enact whole-school change.

8.4 Policy Challenges

This section analyses the broader policy environment that frames and influences the SENCO role. It discusses the impact of government-level changes (Section 8.4.1), SENCOs as victims of self-managing schools (Section 8.4.2), and Review and formalising of the SENCO role title (Section 8.4.3).

8.4.1 The Impact of Government-Level Changes

Since the introduction of the Learning Support Delivery Model in 2020, the government has signalled a shift towards the centralisation of inclusive education provisions. Currently, the SENCO role does not come with any targeted funding, but it is up to the individual school to use its bulk special education funding (SEG) to fund this position (ERO, 2015). In contrast, targeted funding has been provided to supply LSCs based on roll populations (MOE, 2024b). The MOE (2024a) provides directives on how and where LSCs should be allocated, the goals of the role, and priority responsibilities, and provides national professional development and cluster meetings. This current provisioning is more in line with the regulated nature of special educational needs in other countries, such as England. Reflecting on the changes in directives, evidence in this study suggests a cause for concern regarding decision making for school leaders, who may wish to replace the nonfunded SENCO role with the directly funded LSC role.

The introduction of the LSC position has created tension about the lack of clear boundaries between the two roles due, in most part, to the absence of job descriptions. Lin (2020), writing at the time the LSC role was introduced, noted a potential overlap in roles and responsibilities and recommended further research in this area. My own study, completed in 2025, demonstrates that these issues have indeed emerged since the establishment of the position. SENCOs have experienced an overlap of roles, doubling up of responsibilities, and a loss of some of the duties that bring the greatest sense of satisfaction. The continued

absence of clear role descriptors will continue to create challenges for SENCOs and LSCs working alongside each other.

The introduction of the formally funded LSC role is a significant threat to SENCO job security. All three of my case study participants were impacted in some way by the introduction of the LSC roles from entirely replacing the SENCO role for a LSC role to an overlap in responsibilities. In all three situations, it was unclear whether the individual schools recognised the increased level of need, which is, according to Tracey Martin (ex-Associate Minister of Education), the purpose of the additional LSC role rather than merely replacing the nonfunded SENCO role with the newly funded LSC role. This raises the vital question—will schools continue to fund this SENCO role or would school leaders consider the specifically funded LSC role to suffice? Government-level changes have left SENCOs feeling vulnerable and unclear in their roles. The impact of these changes also refers again to relational agency and the impact of government communication on individual SENCOs. Unfortunately, in this case, SENCOs felt a lack of agency between themselves and the MOE, leading to feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty in their roles.

8.4.2 SENCOs as a victim of self-managing schools

SENCOs are victims of New Zealand's unique self-managing school policy, leaving SENCOs feeling isolated in individual schools. It has now been more than 35 years since the introduction of New Zealand's self-managing "Tomorrow's Schools" policy, which some researchers argue has had a detrimental effect on inclusive education in particular. Wylie (2009) found that collaboration between schools has been limited with little sharing of knowledge or resources. This lack of collaboration has had specific consequences for inclusive education where individual students often rely on their own funding, staff, and school-based expertise rather than benefiting from collective support across schools. Wylie (2009) suggests that this outcome stems from the education sector taking the self-managing school policy too literally, granting schools autonomy to lead as they see fit. As a result, schools have become "islands," each attempting to solve problems independently, without the support of nearby schools or clusters. Supporting this view, Thrupp and Willmott (2003) argue that reforms, such as "Tomorrow's Schools," can inadvertently foster competition and isolation between schools, undermining collaborative practices that might otherwise

improve outcomes for students with learning needs. Although the Ministry of Education introduced “Kahui Ako” (Communities of Schools) in early 2014 to encourage collaboration and resource sharing across schools (Post Primary Teachers Association [PPTA], 2025), the government announced their disestablishment in early 2025, withdrawing funding and formal support for these school clusters. It appears that SENCOs have unfortunately become a victim of this “island” way of functioning. In contrast, in international inclusive education contexts, staff often work in sectors or are supported by national guidelines. Unfortunately, a regrettable outcome of New Zealand’s self-managing schools is that SENCOs are working individually, in their own schools, to the detriment of individuals in these roles who may benefit from collective knowledge and resourcing.

8.4.3 Review and Formalising of the SENCO Role Title

Although I have chosen to use the term Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) throughout this research, as this research has progressed, I have become more aware that this term does not adequately convey the role of a SENCO. The inadequacy of the SENCO role title was also a finding of the NZEI (2018) survey where 73% of respondents believed that the SENCO role title did not fully encapsulate the work they do. When researchers asked these survey respondents to provide suggestions of a more appropriate role title, suggestions included “learning support coordinator,” “education needs coordinator,” “learning and behaviour coordinator,” and “inclusive education coordinator.” These new role titles suggest a more holistic approach to the role, incorporating inclusivity as well as behaviour. It is interesting to note that none of the suggestions include “special needs,” which perhaps points to the fact that SENCO work is becoming more diversified to incorporate the needs of a range of students, not just those with educational needs.

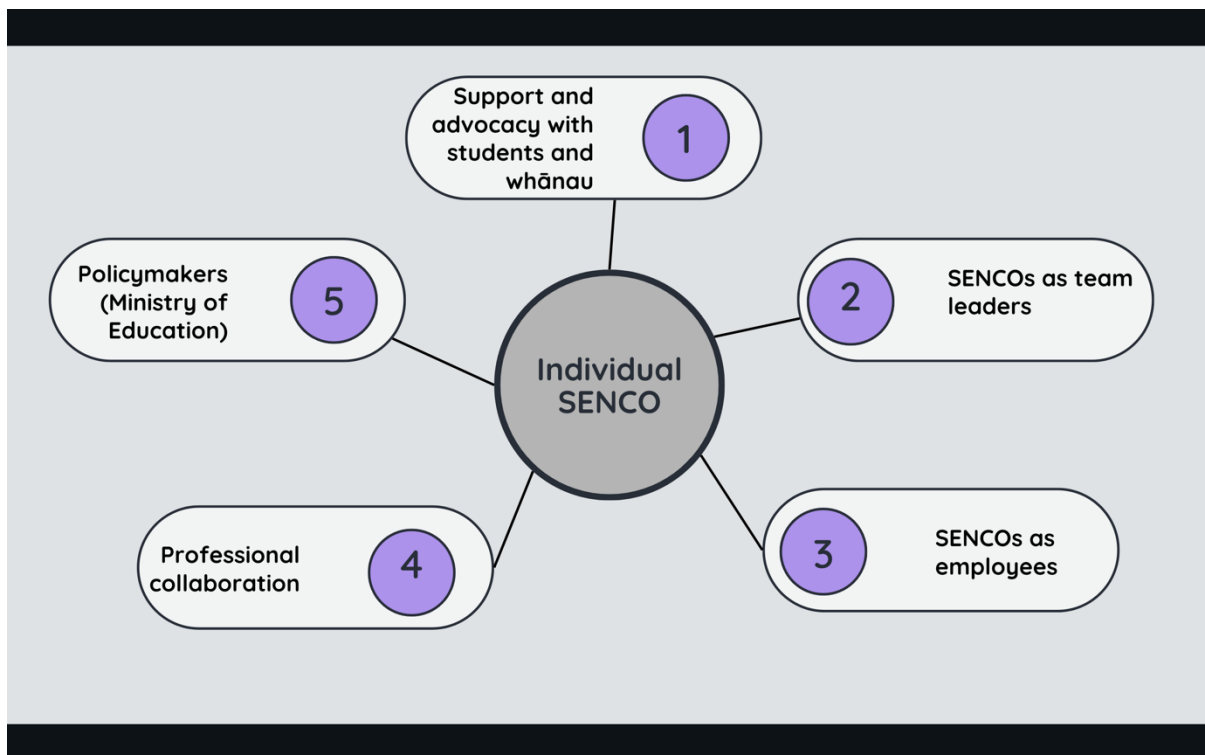
The participants in my case study echoed the results of the NZEI (2018) survey. Although all three participants were officially titled SENCOs, they all shared the view that the role title did not adequately represent the work that they do. Liz—in her work—was moving to include the LSC role, which she believed was more encompassing of the diverse range of needs she supports in her role.

The inconsistency in role titles may also add another layer of challenge to the acknowledgement of the SENCO role. If individuals are working under differing role titles, it may be difficult to connect as a collective group or to feel a sense of belonging to a community. This connects to participant comments earlier in this research, implying they have no idea if there are SENCOs in other schools or whether they are doing similar work. To support the acknowledgement of SENCO individuals in their work and to increase a sense of community, I believe it is essential to formalise a role title that fully encompasses the work of these individuals in New Zealand secondary schools.

8.5 How do SENCOs Engage Relational Agency to Support their Work within Schools?

For New Zealand SENCOs, building relational agency across a team of individuals and organisations is key to gaining the trust, knowledge, and resources necessary to create successful outcomes for students. The central relationship of importance is that with students and their whānau. SENCO participants reported building collaborative relationships with various people to fulfil their roles, including students, parents/whānau, teachers, teacher aides, school management, LSCs, RTLBs, and health workers. The purpose of these various relationships is to enact agency: bringing together individuals and organisations to put plans and assistance in place to create positive outcomes for students. The research demonstrated that these relationships are multifaceted and context dependent with SENCOs in different settings variously enabled or constrained in their capacity to develop them. The research also revealed what outcomes become possible when successful relationships are achieved and, conversely, the impact when these relationships are absent or lacking. Figure 14 presents the relational agency of the SENCO role, categorised into these five types of relationships.

Figure 14:
A Visual Representation of Relationships in the SENCO Role



8.5.1 Support and Advocacy with Students and Whānau

New Zealand research has highlighted the value SENCOs place on their relationships with students and the support provided to students and whānau (Kearney et al., 2018; Lin, 2020; NZEI, 2018), and the relational context of teaching in New Zealand (Bishop, 2003, 2019). SENCO participants believed strong and time-intensive relationships were necessary to build trust as well as to gain insight into the individual needs of the student. Edwards' (2017) expanded definition of relational agency highlights that these relationships are built over a prolonged period, acknowledging that these relationships take time to build and maintain. Participants provided examples of the time taken to build relationships with their students and whānau, believing this was a necessary building block to any agency but a responsibility not recognised or valued by school leaders. Participants also provided examples of disruptions to this agency, caused when LSCs also build relationships with students and whānau. A crucial component of enacting this agency appears to be enabling

SENCOs to be the key communicator and relationship holder with students and whānau.

8.5.2 SENCOs as Team Leaders

SENCOs are reliant on a team of teacher aides to provide support to students across the school. However, agency with teacher aides is constricted due to funding models and lack of recognition of the time needed to lead, manage, and support this team. The most significant barrier impacting successful agency between SENCOs and their teacher aides is the impermanence of teacher aide employment, based on the current funding tagged to students (NZEI Te Riu Roa, 2016; Wylie, 2000). Current funding models restrict SENCOs in enacting agency with their team, increase feelings of guilt and stress, and cause SENCOs to source trained staff—often at short notice—due to impermanence of roles and fluctuating funding.

An enabler to successful agency between a SENCO and a team of teacher aides is time spent as a team to train, debrief, and support each other. There is limited literature that acknowledges the time required to build and sustain agency within SENCO-led teams (Kearney et al., 2017; Wylie, 2000). The findings of this research suggest that school leaders could enable agentic outcomes for SENCOs in their leadership roles by offering management training to assist them in their responsibilities as team leaders and providing more security with staffing.

8.5.3 SENCOs as Employees

The relationship with school leaders was perceived to have the greatest impact on an individual's sense of value in the SENCO role, both in the literature and in this research study (Smith & Broomhead, 2019; Kearney et al., 2017; NZEI, 2018; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Smith, 2022a; Tissot, 2013). An enabler to SENCO agency was a strong relationship with a member of the school's leadership team, involving regular meetings of support, and a sense that school leaders see and value what SENCOs do. School leaders who recognised and involved SENCOs at a leadership level allowed individuals to enact strategic change. Relational agency has been defined by researchers as a collective understanding of what matters (Duhn et al., 2016), illuminating the fact that, as a collective, there is a shared understanding of goals. This exemplifies the importance of school leadership and SENCOs

having the same goals and directions. Unfortunately, a lack of agency between SENCOs and school leaders was identified by two participants as being a key reason for leaving this career; participants perceived a lack of understanding from school leadership and in an inability to enact change at a strategic or leadership level.

8.5.4 Professional Collaboration

Relationships of professional collaboration support SENCOs to enact agency. Looking to Edwards' (2017) expanded definition with the inclusion of "across practice relationships" acknowledges that these relationships cross professional boundaries. Therefore, not only are SENCOs building relationships within the school to enact change but they are also sourcing and building relationships external to the school, across a range of professions, to bring professionals together. SENCOs connect knowledge and expertise to provide resources and supports. The literature identified some need for SENCOs to build relationships with external professionals (Lin, 2020); however, this research took this argument further, highlighting that relational agency with professionals was a key enabler or barrier to fulfilling the SENCO role. Those SENCOs who were able to source and enact agency with other professionals perceived a greater sense of success in their roles whereas those SENCOs who were restricted in their relationships of collaboration felt a distinct lack of agency to source the resources and knowledge required. This raises questions of access to these professionals, which can be supported by school leaders and policymakers. Building professional interagency relationships is key to feeling a sense of agency in this role.

8.5.5 Policymakers (Ministry of Education)

The ability to enact agency is constricted by a lack of communication between SENCOs and policymakers (the Ministry of Education). SENCOs believe a lack of communication, recognition, and support are key barriers to feeling secure, acknowledged, and supported in their roles. Clear communication from the MOE to SENCOs is key to a sense of identity and value. The MOE is strongly recommended to support a sense of community for SENCOs as well improving clear communication.

8.6 Applying a Theoretical Lens of Relational Agency to these Findings

The variable nature of the SENCO role in New Zealand added both complexity and depth to the enactment of agency. Each case study participant worked within a unique context shaped by diverse backgrounds, role expectations, and school environments. Consequently, there was no single way in which SENCOs built relationships; rather, this process was influenced by personal characteristics and the capacity to seek, establish, and sustain connections. These varied contexts provided opportunities to examine how SENCOs developed agency, the extent to which they were enabled to do so, and what successful agency might look like in practice. Within each context, both enablers and constraints shaped the achievement of successful relationships.

My contribution to knowledge is that, when viewed through the theoretical lens of relational agency, two key dimensions of agency of relations – along with accompanying questions - can be identified as central to the SENCO role:

1. Agency to relate:

To what extent are SENCOs able to develop relationships that are important to their role?

What factors act as enablers or constraints to developing these relationships?

2. Agency of relationships:

How do relationships with different groups contribute to SENCO outcomes?

What agentic outcomes become possible for SENCOs when relationships are successfully achieved?

8.6.1 Agency to Relate

In summary, the key enablers to developing successful relationships are:

- Support from leadership (recognition, support, and leadership capacity);
- Time allocation for relationships;
- Access to resources;

- Personal skills of relationship building; and
- Clear role definitions.

The key constraints to developing successful relationships are:

- Workload: multiple responsibilities and heavy administration;
- Role ambiguity and lack of formalisation;
- Funding limitations and impermanence of teacher aides;
- Lack of recognition from leadership;
- Absence of formal networks;
- Undefined role definitions; and
- Infrequent communication from the Ministry of Education.

Overarching these enablers and constraints is an additional layer in the complexity of enacting agency: the expectation that SENCOs be highly relational individuals. The nature of the role places significant reliance on personal characteristics, such as empathy, trust building, and the confidence to network and sustain professional connections. Participants frequently described themselves as “lucky” to possess the confidence and social skills required for this work while noting that other SENCOs were “disadvantaged” or “isolated” when they lacked the ability to act relationally.

Enacting successful relational agency arises when SENCOs are able to establish strong relationships across all five key categories, creating benefits that extend to the whole school community. Rather than being caught between competing demands of directives and advocacy, SENCOs could exercise agency in collaboration with school leadership, contributing to strategic-level decision making that reflects and responds to the needs and voices of students. With leadership support, this would also enable SENCOs to foster whole-school approaches to inclusive practice, reducing the overreliance on a single individual. The findings of this research highlight the considerable physical and emotional burdens placed on individual SENCOs when responsibility rests solely with them. By shifting from a reactive, individualised role toward one of shared, school-wide leadership, SENCOs could more effectively embed sustainable and inclusive systems for students with additional educational needs.

8.6.2 Agency of Relationships

The extent to which SENCOs can achieve meaningful outcomes is directly shaped by the quality of their relationships with different groups. While teachers and whānau enable outcomes at the classroom and student level, school leadership and external professionals enable outcomes at the system and resource level. Taken together, these relationships determine whether SENCOs can act as genuine leaders at a strategic level or remain constrained to reactivity and administration coordination.

Positive relationships with students and whānau empower trust and advocacy. Relationships with teacher aides enable SENCOs to influence agency across a team, supporting and growing a team of expertise. Strong relationships with school leadership are particularly critical as they provide access to support, resources, and involvement at a strategic level, influencing policy and decision making. Similarly, collaborative relationships with external professionals, such as RTLBs, Ministry specialists, and health providers, expand SENCO capacity to address complex needs while also securing additional expertise and funding. Collectively, these relationships determine whether SENCOs are positioned to act as genuine leaders of inclusion or are limited to reactive, case-by-case management.

The following provides a summary of the agentic outcomes that are possible for SENCOs when relationships are successfully achieved:

- Student and whānau advocacy: acknowledging the needs of students and being empowered to make changes for the benefit of students.
- Influence on school structures and policy: this could include aspects like strategic planning or embedding inclusive school-wide systems.
- Securing resources and support: some examples include funding, teacher aide hours, specialist services, and knowledge.
- Building collaborative networks: establishing strong, trusting relationships with students, whānau, colleagues, and external agencies.

8.6.3 Why Relational Agency Matters for SENCOs and Schools

SENCOs are best supported to achieve successful outcomes when relational agency, as defined by Edwards (2005, 2017), is effectively enacted. In practice, this involves building “extended” relationships, both over time and in depth, while also recognising the unique, individualised nature of each relationship. Edwards’ (2005) notion of strengthening purposeful responses is reflected in valuing and integrating the expertise of colleagues and professionals rather than working in isolation. These purposeful responses broaden available resources and generate new solutions. Furthermore, the collective understanding of “what matters” fosters shared responsibility, reducing the burden on SENCOs alone. Ultimately, successful agency leads to a shared capacity for knowledge, empowering others to contribute to meeting the needs of students with additional learning needs. When relational agency is enacted effectively, SENCOs are also enabled to exercise leadership, guiding strategic change and direction with the backing of a wider team. In such contexts, a culture of collective investment in student success emerges.

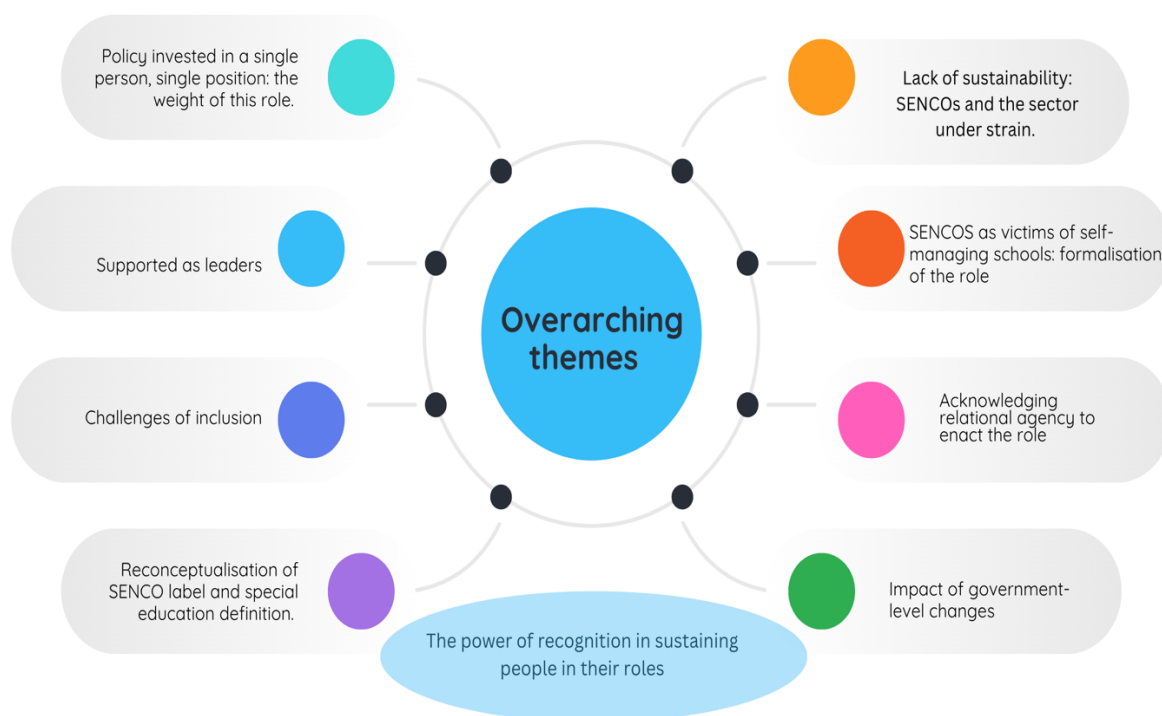
Successful relational agency can strengthen inclusive education provision and enhance SENCO effectiveness. Rather than relying solely on individual knowledge or working in isolation, relational agency emphasises joint problem solving, shared responsibility and expertise, and the co-construction of new knowledge and approaches. This reduces the isolation and emotional toll often experienced by SENCOs, distributes responsibility more equitably, and encourages sustainable school-wide change. Ultimately, relational agency supports a culture of collective ownership and capacity building where SENCOs are empowered as leaders and schools are better positioned to deliver inclusive and responsive education for all learners.

8.7 Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

A key contribution of this study is the identification of nine overarching themes that extend current understanding of the SENCO role, illustrated in Figure 15. Each theme is presented alongside its implications and corresponding recommendations aimed at enhancing the support and recognition of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools.

Figure 15:

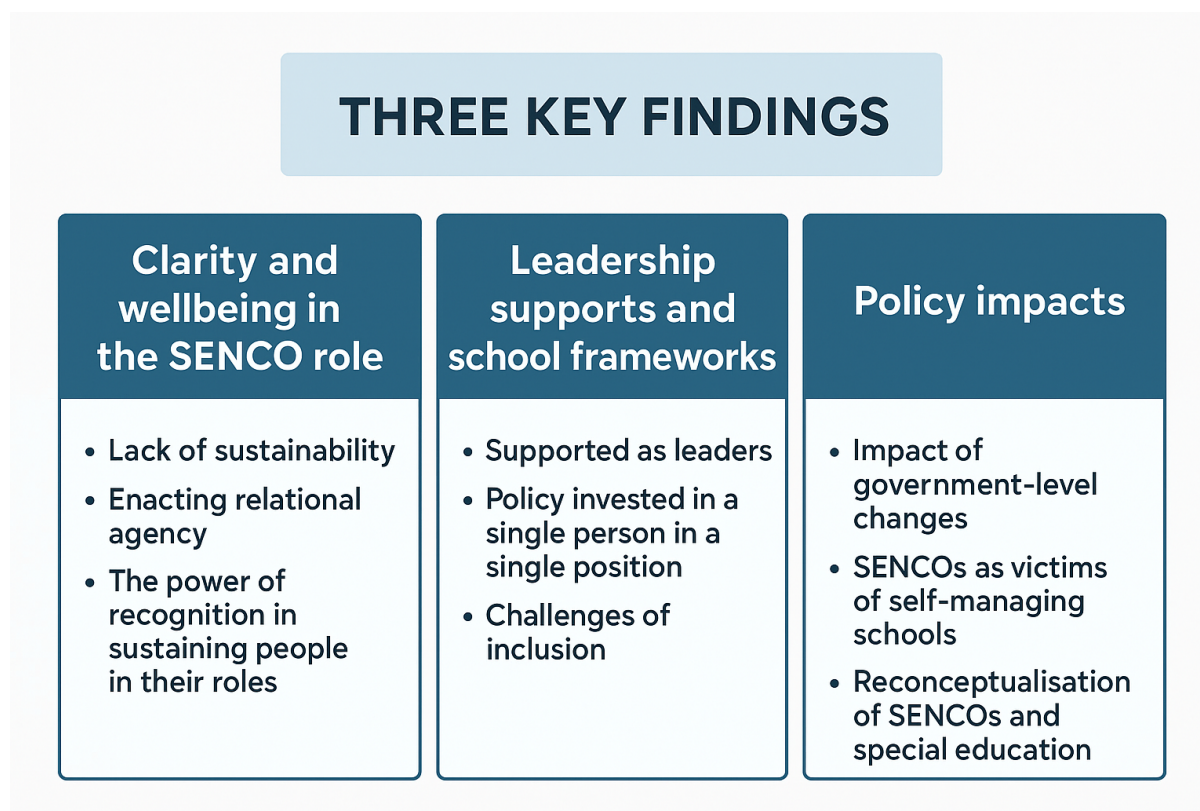
A Visual Representation of the Nine Overarching Themes of This Research Study



To support clarity and facilitate dissemination as a contribution to knowledge, the nine overarching themes are synthesised into three further key contributions to knowledge, reflecting implications for the individual SENCO, the school, and policymakers. These contributions and accompanying findings are shown in Figure 15, but they are summarised as:

1. Clarity and wellbeing in the SENCO role;
2. Supportive leadership and school frameworks; and
3. Policy impacts.

Figure 16:
Three Key Contributions of This Research Study



The following three sections are each devoted to a key finding, drawing implications and recommendations for SENCOs, school leaders, and the Ministry of Education.

8.7.1 Clarity and Wellbeing in the SENCO Role

There are three key implications within this finding:

1. Lack of sustainability: SENCOs and inclusive education under strain;
2. Acknowledging relational agency to enact the role; and
3. The power of recognition in sustaining people in their roles.

8.7.1.1 Lack of Sustainability: SENCOs and Inclusive Education Under Strain.

The SENCO role, as practised by participants in this study, is not sustainable. This research has found concerns for the health and wellbeing of individuals in the SENCO positions. The workload inside and outside of school is untenable. Participants have detailed the physical

and emotional toll of the role, although it has been difficult to discern whether this is an expectation placed on SENCOs by school leadership or an expectation SENCOs place on themselves due to their willingness to "make a difference" or be the "fix it" person. This study argues that the failure of school leaders and policymakers to acknowledge the experiences of SENCOs has contributed to excessive physical and mental workloads with serious implications for their sustained wellbeing.

Drawing on the findings of this research, I propose the following recommendations to New Zealand's Ministry of Education to support the long-term sustainability of the SENCO role:

- To review current funding calculations and consider whether these are still fit for purpose.
- To provide funding to support lower socioeconomic communities access to educational psychologists to address the inequity in obtaining official diagnoses and funding.
- To provide permanent funding for teacher aides in schools to support the retention of trained staff as well as providing SENCOs with certainty and continuity in their departments.

8.7.1.2 Relational Agency Must be Acknowledged to Enact the SENCO Role. Key recommendations to support successful agentic outcomes are:

- Recognition of the relational nature of the SENCO role and for school employers to allow time within the role to form and maintain relationships.
- Clear role descriptors to differentiate the relational roles of LSCs and SENCOs.
- Ministry of Education awareness of the impact of lack of agency on individuals in the SENCO role by prioritising clear communication with SENCOs.
- Recognition and support from senior leadership, together with inclusion in leadership teams, to enable SENCOs to contribute to whole-school strategic policy and to act as leaders of inclusive education provision rather than leaving the responsibility to rest on a single individual.

8.7.1.3 The power of recognition in sustaining people in their role.

SENCOs feel unseen in their roles. There is currently no information held by the Ministry of Education regarding SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools, and existing research on their experiences is limited. Additionally, SENCOs believe there is limited awareness among school leaders of the responsibilities or impacts of the role. A lack of recognition has led to the weight of responsibility for inclusive education within schools resting on the shoulders of one individual, and this weight is accompanied by a physical, mental, and emotional toll that extends well beyond the school day. Participant comments throughout this research have demonstrated that SENCOs want to feel supported and recognised. Possibly because of this lack of recognition, two of the case study participants have since chosen to leave the profession. Recognising SENCOs is essential to support and sustain them in the vital work they do.

Although this research has started to recognise SENCOs in their work, there is much more work to be done. Recommendations for further recognition include a larger-scale study of SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools. It is also suggested that the Ministry of Education support recognition and a sense of identity for SENCOs by maintaining databases of SENCOs, and providing regular communication and networking opportunities.

8.7.2 Leadership Supports and School Frameworks

The three findings within this category are as follows:

1. SENCOs need to be supported as leaders;
2. Policy invested in a single position—the weight of this role; and
3. Inclusion policies bring about challenges for SENCOs.

8.7.2.1 SENCOS supported as leaders. This research has highlighted two key areas to support SENCOS as leaders: consistent and regular support from leaders to acknowledge and support the work of SENCOS and the importance of SENCOS being represented in leadership, particularly strategic decision making. This research has highlighted the fact that it is necessary for SENCOS to meet regularly with a member of the leadership team for support and to monitor workloads. It is also imperative that school leaders are aware of the numbers and diversity of students SENCOS are supporting to protect the wellbeing of SENCOS. To support SENCOS as leaders, I make the following recommendations:

- A member of the senior leadership team could meet regularly with the SENCO to provide support, advice, and guidance. This meeting needs to discuss workload and additional responsibilities, and to regularly audit numbers and needs on the register that SENCOS are supporting.
- A board of trustees policy is necessary that clearly outlines the types of students SENCOS support to protect both the school and the wellbeing of the individual SENCO. If there are students who SENCOS are supporting who fall outside these outlines, there needs to be a school plan to provide alternative support for these students.
- School leaders are encouraged to provide appropriate professional development for class teachers to support them to work with complex learning needs. Empowering classroom teachers to work with a greater diversity of students will share collaborative responsibility for additional learning needs, expanding capacity across the schools and supporting SENCOS as school-wide leaders rather than holding sole responsibility.
- SENCOS could be included at some leadership level within schools, particularly when discussing policy and strategic-level decision making regarding inclusive education.

8.7.2.2 Policy invested in a single person, single position – the weight of this role. This research revealed that a single individual bears responsibility for as many as 30% of students in a school who are requiring inclusive educational support. SENCOs believe they are solely responsible for providing support to these students as well as providing knowledge and support to their colleagues. I have questioned whether school leaders and the MOE have fully examined the consequences of entrusting inclusive education policy to one individual in a solitary role. To distribute responsibility for inclusive education, I make the following recommendation:

- Schools should establish a team of staff members who collectively share responsibility for inclusive education. Potential approaches include appointing an assistant SENCO and designating a senior leader with oversight of inclusive education.

8.7.2.3 Challenges of inclusion. There is existing tension between school leadership teams directed by a “radical” inclusion policy and SENCOs advocating for individual needs. Inclusion of SENCOs in leadership meetings will support strategic decision making that supports individual students and the needs of the school. Therefore, I make the following recommendation:

- That SENCO individuals attend regular leadership team meetings to discuss school inclusion policy. SENCOs can advocate for individual students who may require supports outside the goal of mainstream attendance.

8.7.3 Policy Impacts

There are three themes relating to the key theme of policy impacts:

1. Impact of government-level changes;
2. SENCOs as victims of self-managing schools; and
3. Reconceptualisation of the SENCO label and inclusive education definition.

8.7.3.1 The impact of government-level changes. This research has highlighted the tensions between existing SENCOs and the newly created LSCs due to a lack of specific job descriptions for both roles. The lack of role clarification has led to blurred boundaries between the two roles, and SENCOs losing parts of their role that bring them a sense of value and having concerns about job security. This research highlights the vital importance of SENCOs within our secondary schools and argues for the necessity for SENCOs to remain in place alongside LSCs. This research has led to several recommendations to school leaders and policymakers to support both SENCOs and LSCs in their roles:

- The intentions of each role need to be clearly defined, alongside a formalised job description and list of responsibilities for both SENCOs and LSCs. Alternatively, if SENCOs were to be phased out over time and replaced with LSC positions, this needs to occur with clearer mandates and better support.
- Senior leadership teams need to support cooperation and collaboration through a team approach. I recommend a member of the leadership team meets with both the SENCO and LSC on a regular basis to support clear communication and collegiality.

8.7.3.2 SENCOs as “victims” of self-managing schools: formalisation of the role.

After comparing the functioning of the SENCO role with those in international contexts, particularly SENCOs in England, I conclude that the lack of formalisation leaves New Zealand SENCOs at a distinct disadvantage. Participants voiced insecurity in their role identities, including their role responsibilities, support, and resources. This research argues that SENCOs have been unfairly disadvantaged due to New Zealand’s self-managing “Tomorrow’s Schools” policy, leaving individuals disconnected in schools and without adequate guidance and support.

The following recommendations are proposed:

- Targeted Ministry of Education funding to resource a SENCO position in each secondary school. Alternatively, if LSCs are to replace SENCO roles, there needs to be a formal consideration of how to best provide inclusive education support,

then to reconsider what roles are needed to do this the most effectively within schools. The formalisation of this role will include a standardised role title.

- Regular cluster meetings of SENCOs to collaborate and share, overseen by the Ministry of Education.
- A move towards a national, formalised job description for SENCOs in New Zealand secondary schools.
- Fund nationwide specific training and qualifications to support SENCOs in their roles. Universities to develop programmes for aspiring and in-service SENCOs and LSCs.

8.7.3.3 Reconceptualising inclusive education definitions and SENCO titles. This study concludes with a firm recommendation to revisit and reassess the definitions of inclusive education and the SENCO role. I firmly believe this is the essential starting point for any review of inclusive education policy and provision. Without first re-examining and clarifying both the definition of the students being supported and the role of those providing this support, any subsequent changes to the sector will have limited impact. There is a growing disconnect between existing definitions of educational needs at both national and school levels and the actual diversity of students SENCOs are required to support. Therefore, I argue that the formal definition of additional learning needs requires immediate reconsideration by both the MOE and school leadership.

Additionally, the current title of “SENCO” does not adequately capture the full scope of responsibilities undertaken by individuals in this role and that variations in role titles may undermine SENCO identity and their sense of professional community. Therefore, this research concludes with a proposition to reconceptualise inclusive education and the SENCO role title:

- To review the MOE-level definition of inclusive education to ensure it reflects the diverse range of students currently supported in New Zealand secondary schools.

- Policymakers to evaluate whether the current title of SENCO fully reflects the breadth of the role and whether alternative terminology might better encompass the responsibilities involved.
- Learning needs registers to be reviewed frequently by school leaders to ensure the students being supported align with school policies and definitions of educational needs.

To conclude this thesis, I now examine the limitations of the research as well as identifying areas for further research.

8.8 Limitations

One of the limitations of this research was the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of preparing my methodology and application for ethical approval, New Zealand was under “lockdown” to control the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of government regulations, all schools and educational facilities were closed. I planned the methodology assuming that our country would be out of lockdown and schools would resume as normal, giving me access to staff to survey and interview. Subsequent lockdowns, and staff illness and wellbeing did cause some delays and postponements of interviews. Some interviews occurred via Zoom conferencing due to travel restrictions. I also suspected that the number of responses to the electronic survey were impacted due to work pressures during this period. Therefore, there is a recognition that this pandemic has impacted my research. The lockdowns may have added pressure to SENCOs’ workloads since they could not physically “see” their students, and some SENCOs declined to participate in the study due to workload and wellbeing concerns. The impact of the pandemic on SENCOs’ workloads and job satisfaction is unpacked in the participant interviews. Acknowledging the impacts of this pandemic, I was aware that the data generation methods may need to be altered as needed throughout the research.

A limitation of this study was that I did not interview employers of SENCOs. Therefore, it is unknown what school leaders understand about the SENCO role. Although I did ask SENCOs about their relationships with school leaders and leadership’s involvement in the SENCO

role, further research is needed to understand school leaders' perceptions and understandings of this role.

Conscious choices about research design have been made to create a richness of data and to highlight SENCOs' voices. When planning this research design, I was not interested in a large-scale research study as it was important to me to capture detailed experiences. Based on this conscious reasoning, I focused on three case study participants with nine interviews. I believed this would be a manageable level of data analysis for a project this size while valuing the level of detail provided by participants. I believe that larger-scale case studies may have meant that I could only interview each participant once, perhaps missing the trust that emerged over the three interviews. I also believed that conducting more than three case studies would have meant the level of detail that I was hoping for may not have been achieved. It was important for me to capture a rich snapshot of who these people are, why they fulfil this role, and specific details to capture the day-to-day experiences of those in the role.

A consequence of making this research design choice is that generalisation from this study is not appropriate. While the three case study individuals have provided rich, detailed data, it is not possible to generalise from this study to all SENCO work in New Zealand secondary schools. Another limitation is geographical. All SENCOs in the survey and case studies worked in the North Island of New Zealand. It is possible that SENCOs in other geographical areas receive additional support or face different challenges. Therefore, a recommendation would be to extend this research study to a larger group of SENCOs or in different geographical areas.

A further limitation of this study relates to the socio-economic contexts of the participating schools. All three SENCO participants were based in schools with mid-range equity index ratings, which reflect moderate levels of socio-economic need within their communities in the New Zealand context. While participants did not explicitly identify socio-economic factors as influencing their work, it is possible that such factors may have shaped aspects of practice, including whānau and community access to resources, access to formal diagnoses, and the prevalence of identified student needs. Although an examination of socio-economic

influences was beyond the scope of this study, this represents an important limitation. Future research could usefully explore how differing equity index contexts shape SENCO practice across a broader range of school settings.

8.9 Areas for Future Research

This research is situated within the New Zealand context and is therefore underpinned by obligations to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. While SENCO participants did not explicitly reference these obligations in interviews, supporting Māori students as Māori is a fundamental aspect of these commitments. As a non-Māori researcher, and recognising the importance of cultural authority and positionality, I made a deliberate decision not to centre this study on Māori-specific experiences or SENCO practices in relation to Te Tiriti. However, the absence of an explicit focus on Māori learners represents a limitation of this research and reflects a broader gap within the current knowledge base. This study therefore highlights the need for further research that centres Māori students within inclusive education and critically examines how SENCO practice can meaningfully support inclusion and uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations.

Within my research, I was fortunate to speak with two LSCs in their second year in the role. I believe a more in-depth study of the new LSC role is needed in future research, not just for the future of the LSC role but to help inform changes to better support the functioning of the different roles in inclusive education and how they interact to support students, primarily with SENCOs and RTLBs.

A larger-scale study of SENCOs in secondary schools would be needed to form any generalisations from this study. As discussed in section 8.8, the participants in this study were located in one geographical location of New Zealand and all worked in mid-range equity index (mid-range socio-economic) schools, so expanding the scope of participants is needed to understand SENCO experiences further. Highlighting feelings of being overwhelmed and the emotional toll of this role, I believe it is essential that we conduct research into the nature, diversity, and scale of learning needs in New Zealand secondary schools. I could find very little research literature exploring New Zealand student learning needs. Further research could focus on the current systems within the MOE for supporting

SENCOs, including an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of funding and resourcing arrangements as well as the experiences of those employed in roles associated with responding to additional educational needs.

At the time of writing of this thesis, the New Zealand Government made new budget announcements, specifically focused on inclusive education. The Government's 2025 budget promised more targeted funding to support students with diverse educational needs, the capacity to support more students with ORS funding, more funding for teacher aides, and an increase to the number of funded LSCs in schools (Ministry of Education, 2025). As I completed this research, there was not yet any mention of SENCOs in the New Zealand 2025 budget announcements. Consequently, it can be assumed that SENCOs will continue to be an optional resourcing decision by schools.

I conclude this final section by emphasising the need to reconsider and reassess inclusive education as the necessary first step before implementing any further changes. This begins with redefining diverse educational needs so they more accurately reflect the students requiring SENCO support in schools. Policymakers and school leaders must then address the growing demand for inclusive education by clarifying what roles or provisions are best suited to meet these needs. Such decisions require a clear understanding of the SENCO role and the responsibilities currently undertaken by those in these positions. Only once the sector has been reviewed in light of increasing pressures should strategic reforms be made. It may be that the current model—SENCOs and LSCs working alongside each other—can be effective, but this requires clearer role definitions and boundaries. Alternatively, a more significant change may be necessary if SENCOs and LSCs are found to be duplicating work. In that case, one well-defined role, with formal recognition, funding, support networks, and the capacity for agency and leadership, may be more effective. The aim of this research is to provide a comprehensive understanding of both SENCOs and the wider inclusive education sector so that policymakers can make informed decisions to better support students, whānau, and the SENCOs working within a system currently under strain.

8.10 Concluding Comments

This study has examined the experiences and practices of SENCOs within New Zealand secondary schools, using the methodological tools of survey and case study. SENCOs feel unseen and unacknowledged in New Zealand secondary schools. While the lack of formal regulation has allowed schools to tailor the SENCO role to their needs, it has also left many SENCOs overburdened, unsupported, and unacknowledged.

My first contribution to knowledge is that, when viewed through the theoretical lens of relational agency, two key dimensions of agency can be identified as central to the SENCO role. By analysing their roles through the lens of relational agency, I have been able to explore both the opportunities and constraints that shape their work. This finding provides new insight into how SENCOs develop and exercise agency within their school contexts. In highlighting these dimensions, my research adds to existing understandings of the SENCO role by demonstrating the relational and situated nature of their work. It also offers a framework for considering how agency might be supported, enabling SENCOs to enact their role more effectively in practice.

This research concludes with a further three key contributions to knowledge, each carrying implications and recommendations for school leaders and policymakers to strengthen the sustainability of the SENCO role. Central to these are the formalisation of the role's title and responsibilities to enhance recognition, support, retention, and the capacity for agency and leadership. Finally, the study calls for a reconceptualisation of both the definition of additional educational needs and the SENCO role itself, ensuring greater alignment with the realities of the contemporary context in New Zealand secondary schools. Any meaningful reform of inclusive education must begin by redefining the learners being supported and the role of those providing that support; without this, all other changes risk being ineffective. This study calls for an acknowledgement of SENCO contributions and carefully considering both the challenges and the successful practices within the role. Only then will decision makers be well placed to build on existing strengths, direct resources more effectively, and implement thoughtful policy reforms that enhance inclusive education provision.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Questions

This research has been approved by the University of Waikato Division of Education Ethics Committee on (date). Approval number: FEDU047/20.

Thank you in advance for participating in this research study. The aim of this research is to understand the roles and experiences of SENCOS currently working in our secondary schools. Your responses to this survey will help give 'voice' to individuals in the SENCO role. If you choose to participate in this survey, all responses will be recorded anonymously and no identifying information will be gathered. However, please note that while every effort will be made to maintain anonymity, this cannot be guaranteed. Please read the Email Information Letter for more information.

By completing and submitting this survey, you consent to your survey responses being used in this research study.

Section 1: Demographics and Experience

1. Please indicate to which age bracket you belong.
35. 35-45 45-55 55-65 65-75

2. How many years have you been in the Education profession?
5. years 5-10 years 10-15 years 15-20 years 20-25 years 25-10 years 30 years+

3. How many years have you worked in SENCO roles (or similar learning support roles) throughout your career?
5. years 5-10 years 10-15 years 15-20 years 20-25 years 25-10 years 30 years+

4. What was your pathway to SENCO (please tick each of the roles you have held)
Teacher Aide
Classroom Teacher
Middle Management (HOD, Dean etc)
Senior Management (AP/DP/Principal)
RTL
Teaching/Involvement in a Primary School setting

5. Please list your professional qualifications.

6. Why did you become a SENCO?

Section 2: Your Role

7. What is your current position(s) at your school? Please list all areas in which you have responsibility.

The abbreviation SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) is used for the remainder of the questions. This term is used to encompass all Learning Support Coordinator positions.

8. How many years have you held the SENCO position at your current school?

9. Please indicate how prepared you feel you were to carry out your SENCO role

1= not at all prepared

10=extremely prepared

Please comment:

10. Please describe the SENCO role in up to five words.

Support and Reporting

11. Who do you report to?

12. What arrangements are there for you to report/meet?

13. Please list the places/people/organisations that provide you with support in this role.

14. How comfortable are you with the level of support in your role?

1 = not comfortable at all, needing further support

10 = completely comfortable with the support available

15. How much flexibility do you have in carrying out your role?

1=no flexibility at all

10=complete flexibility

16. How comfortable are you with the level of flexibility in your role?

1 – not comfortable at all with the level of flexibility

10 = completely comfortable with the level of flexibility

The SENCO Role in Practice

17. How would you describe your contracted hours for the SENCO role specifically? E.g. full-time, part-time, held in conjunction with other responsibilities? Please explain.

18. Please tick the boxes of all areas/tasks for which you are responsible:

Areas in my role include:

Special needs budget

Management of teacher aides

Special educational needs testing

Special assessment conditions

Professional Development for teachers

Professional Development for teacher aides

Teaching

Supporting teachers

Inclusion in the Senior Leadership Team

Parent/whanau contact

Contact with External agencies (Ministry, RTLBs, Psychologists etc).

Other, please add.

19. How would you rate your workload in the SENCO role?

1= not achievable at all. Many tasks/responsibilities not completed

10= totally achievable. All responsibilities managed

20. Which FIVE tasks/responsibilities occupy most of your time?

21. Which THREE tasks/responsibilities do you wish you had more time for?

22. Please add any further comment on time and tasks: (NA if no comment)

Achievements and Challenge

23. Which part of this SENCO role gives you the most satisfaction?

24. Which part of this SENCO role is the most challenging?

25. List the ways in which your SENCO role has changed during your time in the role.

26. Please rate your sense of job satisfaction in the SENCO role

1= Completely dissatisfied

10= Completely satisfied, love my job

Comment:

27. Any other comments you wish to make?

Appendix B: Summary of Literature Findings to Drive Survey and Case Study Questions

Question Area	Researchers	Finding or Theory	Question area for my own study
Role title	NZEI (2018)	65% of survey participants disagreed with the role title 'SENCO' and believed there would be a more appropriate role title to fully encapsulate the SENCO role. Survey participants believed titles such as "Head of Learning Support" were more suitable.	Do survey and/or case study participants use the role title SENCO and believe this title encapsulates the entirety of their role? Are there suggestions for a more appropriate role title?
Demographics	Storer (2002); Collinson (2011)	SENCOs are mature, primarily female, and have considerable experience in the Education sector before taking on the SENCO role.	Are the demographics of my survey and case study participants similar? Do participants have extensive experience in Education, or believe it is necessary to have this extensive experience before taking on the SENCO role?
Qualifications	Kearney et al. (2017); NZEI (2018); Taylor (2014)	There is no formal training or qualifications required to be a SENCO in New Zealand	What prior training or qualifications do my participants have? Do participants feel prepared to take on the SENCO role, given the lack of mandated training and qualifications?
Individual Experiences	Rosen-Webb (2011)	SENCO voices and individual experiences are missing from the research literature.	Do participants believe their experiences have been recognised? Provide opportunities for individual voices and experiences.

High turnover	NZEI (2018)	Across both surveys, more than half of participants had been in the role for less than five years, suggesting a high rate of turnover in New Zealand SENCO positions.	Survey and case study participants would be questions regarding length of time in the SENCO role, and future career plans.
Additional responsibilities and challenges of time.	Smith & Broomhead (2019); Kearney et al. (2017); Lin (2020); Smith (2022); Tissot (2013).	SENCOs are expected to hold additional responsibilities (such as teaching time), possibly because of wide and varied role descriptors.	Do case study participants have job descriptions? Are they expected to hold additional responsibilities? And are these additional responsibilities contributing to the challenges of time.
Support networks	NZEI (2018)	More than half of SENCOs do not have the opportunity to collaborate with other SENCOs.	What support networks do survey and case study participants have access to?
Relationships within the role	Lin (2020); Wright (2022a)	Relationships central to the ability to fulfil a role within Education.	How do SENCOs value and use relationships to fulfil their roles?
Leadership aspect of the SENCO role	Curren (2019); Northouse (2013); Rosen-Webb (2011); Smith (2022); Tissot (2013).	Mismatch between expectations of SENCOs as leaders and lack of leadership opportunities or involvement in SLT.	What is the extent of the leadership role of SENCOs in my study? Are they included in the SLT? Are SENCOs valued as leaders within the school?

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The following questions are a guide for the three semi-structured interviews. The questions are a guide only, and may change depending on the responses provided by participants. Follow-up questions may need to be asked, as well as questions that check for clarity of understanding or to unpack something raised by the participant. Questions may also change depending on what is 'on top' for the SENCO participant.

At the conclusion of the interview questions, I will ask the SENCO participant to work on the Concept Map, which is a visual representation of their role as SENCO and will be used as a visual data source. There will be time provided to add to this Concept Map at each subsequent interview.

Interview One: August 2020

Section One: Position, Experience and Responsibilities

1. Please tell me your background to this role (educational background, formal training, teaching experience and professional experience prior to this role).
2. What is your current position within this school, and how long have you held this role? Do you concurrently hold any other roles/positions of responsibility?
3. How well prepared did you feel to take on this role? (did formal training and experience adequately prepare you for this role? Other training/PD needed?)
4. Why have you chosen this career pathway and in particular to be a SENCO?
5. What are your beliefs about Special Education and the inclusion of students with special educational needs in the mainstream classroom?

Section Two: Practicalities of the Role

6. What are the main tasks or responsibilities of your role?
7. Please tell me about an average working week in your role as SENCO. *Follow-up or clarification questions as required.*
8. Who do you report to, what arrangements are there for you to report/meet and how often do you meet?

Successes and Challenges

9. What are the greatest accomplishments in your role? What areas give you the greatest sense of satisfaction?
10. What are the biggest challenges or pressures in your role? (possible prompts: time, variety of student needs, admin, resourcing, parents, agency reps, ...)

Current Priorities/Challenges: August 2020

11. Approaching the middle of Term three, what are your biggest priorities or challenges in your role right now?
12. Do you have any further comment about your SENCO role or the issues you are facing at this point of the year?

Time for questions if needed.

Interview Two (December 2020)

Current Priorities/Challenges: December 2020

1. What are you busy with at this time of year?
2. Please describe an average working week in your role of SENCO at this time of the year.
3. What has been your greatest achievement or accomplishment in your role this year?
4. What will be your biggest priorities or challenges as you begin to prepare for next year?

Support and Reporting

5. What involvement do senior leaders have in the organisation of your work/your days?
6. What support is there for the SENCO role externally? How do you use this support?
7. The flexibility of the SENCO role in New Zealand has been praised in the literature as being of great advantage. How flexible do you see the role? Please discuss your thoughts about this statement.
8. If you could suggest three changes to support the current functioning of your role, what would they be?

Changes in the Role

9. Has your role changed at all during your time in this position?
10. To what extent do you envisage that the introduction of the Learning Support Coordinator positions will have an impact on your role? Prompt: To what extent will the introduction of this position be of advantage or disadvantage to you in your role as you see it at this time?

Satisfaction in the Role

11. Why do you continue to do this SENCO role? Why is it important to you?
12. Do you have any further comments?

Time for questions if needed.

Interview Three (March 2021)

Current Priorities/Challenges: March 2021

1. What is currently 'on top' for you at this mid-point of Term One? (planning, busy with?)
2. Please describe an average working week in your role of SENCO at this time of year.
3. What tasks/responsibilities are taking most of your time currently?
4. What tasks/responsibilities do you wish you had more time for?
5. How might your role be different this year, as compared with 2020?

The Unique Role of SENCOs in New Zealand

6. Currently there are no formal qualifications or mandatory training required to be a SENCO in New Zealand. Do you believe this is an advantage of our New Zealand system? Please explain.

Changes

7. Last year saw the introduction of the Learning Delivery Model and the Learning Support Coordinator positions. Have these changes had an impact on your role to date?

Conclusions: Understanding the SENCO Role

13. Please use up to five words to describe the SENCO role.
14. If you were asked to name three key strengths of this role, what would they be?
15. Who needs to understand your role? How well is what SENCOs do, understood? (Follow up: how well is what SENCOs do, understood? What would you like the education sector to know or understand about SENCOs?)

16. Any last comments?

Final questions, thank you and farewells.

Appendix D: Ethics Application Approval, The University of Waikato

Te Kura Toi Tangata
Division of Education
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton, New Zealand, 3240

DivEd Ethics Committee
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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

14/8/2020

Dear Anna Blake

Division of Education Ethics Application Approved FEDU047/20

I am pleased to advise you that your ethics application for the project entitled "The Role of Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in New Zealand Secondary Schools." was approved by Te Kura Toi Tangata Division of Education Ethics Committee on August 14th, 2020.

Please be aware that the Te Kura Toi Tangata Division of Education Ethics Committee must be advised (by memo) of any changes to the details recorded in your ethics application. Please send any such advice to fedu.ethics@waikato.ac.nz. You will receive a memo of approval once the change(s) has been considered.

Kind regards

Co-chair

Te Kura Toi Tangata Division of Education Ethics Committee

Appendix E: Email Invitation and Information Letter (Survey)

Invitation to Participate

The Role of Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in New Zealand Secondary Schools.

This research has been approved by the University of Waikato Division of Education Ethics Committee on (date). Approval number: FEDU047/20

I invite you to participate in an anonymous online survey for my research study on the role of Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in New Zealand secondary schools. This research will be used to complete a Thesis for the qualification of the Doctorate of Education at the University of Waikato.

Now that the Special Education sector is facing major changes, the experiences and realities of the individuals filling these SENCO positions become important to understand. The aim of this research is to highlight the successes, challenges, workload and day-to-day realities you face in your role as SENCO. It is my intention to use the results of this research study to inform SENCOs, Principals, Special Education associations, and the Ministry of Education of the outcomes and recommendations arising.

Stage One of this research study is an online survey of SENCOs in secondary schools, exploring what their roles entail and their experiences of the role. I am sending this survey to all secondary school SENCOs in the Waikato region. Your participation in this survey will help bring 'voice' to this important role and give you an opportunity to communicate your experiences of the SENCO role, to help improve the education sector's understanding of this crucial role and how it functions.

I invite you to complete this anonymous online survey. There are 27 survey questions, including a mixture of rating questions and short answer questions. I envisage the survey will take up to 25 minutes to complete, depending on the length of your comments. Your involvement in this research study is completely voluntary. By completing and submitting this survey, you consent to your survey responses being used in this research study.

I am the only researcher who will be able to access your data. All responses are anonymous and no names or contact emails of participants will be collected. I will remove all names and identifiable features from comment responses. Pseudonyms will be used if it is necessary for the write-up of individual comments. Please note that all survey data is stored within the Qualtrics system – outside of the University of Waikato. Responses will be stored on a password protected computer. Please note that while every effort will be made to maintain anonymity, this cannot be guaranteed. Findings from the study will be used for my Doctoral Thesis, conferences, and other professional presentations, some of which will be available online.

If you have any concerns about the research or a dispute arises please contact myself, Anna, in the first instance:

annablake24@hotmail.com

Should there be no resolution, then you may contact my supervisors, Dr Kerry Earl Rinehart and Dr Sashi Sharma.

Dr Kerry Earl Rinehart, PhD, Senior Lecturer, University of Waikato

kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz

Dr Sashi Sharma, PhD, Senior Lecturer, University of Waikato

sashi@waikato.ac.nz

Thank you for taking the time to read this Invitation to Participate. Your participation is greatly valued and will help improve what we know about the SENCO position.

Kind regards

Anna Blake

Appendix F: Information Letter for SENCO Participants (Case Study)
University of Waikato

Division of Education

The Role of Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in New Zealand Schools
Invitation to Participate

This research has been approved by the University of Waikato Division of Education Ethics Committee on (date) (approval number...).

I (Anna Blake) am the sole researcher for this study, and I will be using this research to complete a Thesis for the qualification of the Doctorate of Education at the University of Waikato. This research is supervised by Dr Kerry Earl Rinehart and Dr Sashi Sharma, both from the Division of Education, University of Waikato. Full contact details for myself and my supervisors are provided at the end of this letter.

This research study aims to better understand the role and experiences of SENCOs working in New Zealand secondary schools. New Zealand literature reveals that as yet, little is known about how a SENCO role functions in practice, or how SENCOs make sense of their roles. The aim of this research is to highlight day-to-day realities and experiences of the role in order to understand this important role better, and to make recommendations to the Ministry of Education to improve the functioning of the role in practice. Stage One of this research is a 'stocktake' survey. For Stage Two, I am inviting you to participate in a case study, which examines the work experiences and day-to-day realities in more depth for three SENCOs fulfilling this role.

If you consent to participate in this research, I will first meet with you to discuss the research in more detail and answer any questions you may have. The research will then consist of three one-hour long interviews spaced over the course of nine months. At this stage, I anticipate these interviews will take place in August 2020, December 2020, and March 2021. Interview questions will ask about your experiences as a SENCO, your day-to-day realities and workload, your successes/challenges, and what is currently 'on top' for you. At each interview, you will also work on a Concept Map to visually represent your role as a SENCO. You will have choice over where and when these interviews take place; either at your school during work hours, or at your home or cafe at a day/time of your choice, or via video conferencing such as Zoom. Participation in this research study will require eight hours of your time over a nine-month period including interviews, reviewing transcripts and interaction to make arrangements that suit you.

If you consent to participate in this research study, I will also seek consent from the Principal and Board of Trustees of your school. They will be informed of the purpose of the study and that you have agreed to participate.

Each of the three interviews will be recorded, but this recording will only be accessed by myself and will be stored on a password-protected computer. I will transcribe each of the

three interviews and send you a copy to modify/correct. Once you are happy with the transcript, you can return them to me for inclusion in the study.

Steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in this study. Pseudonyms will be used throughout the study for your name and the name of your school. No identifying information will be given on the transcripts or in the discussion of results. As per the University's Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations 2008, all non-identifying data (survey results and interview transcripts) used for publication will be securely kept long enough to allow for academic examination, challenge, or peer review. This period will be five years. Identifying data such as consent forms and concept maps will be securely stored consistent with agreements made under section 9(4) (a) of these regulations. All interview transcripts will be stored on a password-protected computer, and all concept maps will be stored in a locked cabinet. Please note that while all steps will be taken to protect your identity, anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

At the conclusion of this study participants will receive a link to the published Thesis on the University of Waikato Research Commons website. It is also my intention to share the findings of this study with the Ministry of Education and SENCO associations to improve the understanding of this important role and to make recommendations about possible changes to the functioning of the SENCO role. The results of this study may also be shared in academic settings, such as conferences and journal articles. However, no identifying information will be used at any time and pseudonyms will always be used for participants and schools. There is no monetary gain associated with this study.

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You have the ability to withdraw without explanation at any point up until three weeks after the third and final interview. You have the right to ask further questions that occur to you during your participation. You also have the right to decline to answer any particular question. At any stage during this study, if you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact myself (Anna) in the first instance: annablake24@hotmail.com

Should there be no resolution, then you may contact my supervisors, Kerry Earl Rinehart and Sashi Sharma, Division of Education, University of Waikato. Full contact details are provided below. Thank you for considering your participation in this research study. Your participation in this study will provide valuable information about the role of SENCOS in New Zealand secondary schools.

Kind regards,
Anna Blake, MEd.
027 333 7170
annablake24@hotmail.com

Dr Kerry Earl Rinehart, PhD, Senior Lecturer, University of Waikato
kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz

Dr Sashi Sharma, PhD, Senior Lecturer, University of Waikato
sashi@waikato.ac.nz

Appendix G: Consent Form for SENCO Participants (Case Study)

UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
DIVISION OF EDUCATION

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**The Role of Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in New Zealand Secondary Schools**

Name of participant: _____

I have received a copy of the Information Letter describing the research project. Any questions that I have, relating to the research, have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions about the research at any time during my participation, and that I can withdraw my participation at any time up to three weeks after the third and final interview.

During the interviews, I understand that I do not have to answer questions unless I am happy to talk about the topic. I can stop the interviews at any time, and I can ask to have the recording device turned off at any time. I also understand that I will be sent a copy of the transcript after each interview and will have three weeks to make any modifications or corrections to this transcript.

When I sign this consent form, I will retain ownership of my interviews and concept map, but I give consent for the researcher to use the interviews and concept map for the purposes of the research outlined in the Information Letter.

I understand that, while my identity will remain confidential in the presentation of the research findings and all steps will be taken to protect my identity, anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Please complete the following checklist. Tick [✓] the appropriate box for each point.	YES	NO
I consent to the Principal and Board of Trustees of my school being contacted about my involvement in this research study.		
I understand that I can ask further questions about the research at any time during my participation.		
I understand that I can withdraw my participation at any time up to three weeks after the third and final interview.		
I consent to the interviews being recorded.		
I understand that I can ask to have the recording device turned off at any time.		
I understand that I can decline to answer any questions.		
I understand that interviews will be transcribed and that I will have the opportunity to review the transcripts.		
I consent to completing a Concept Map, which will have all identifying information removed.		

I understand that, while steps will be taken to protect my identity, anonymity cannot be guaranteed.		
--	--	--

Participant :	_____	Researcher :	_____
Signature :	_____	Signature :	_____
Date :	_____	Date :	_____
Contact Details :	_____	Contact Details :	_____
	_____		_____