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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Inclusive education 2025: Global trends, local challenges and solutions

‘Stretched...like butter scraped over too much bread’—The SENCo role in Sweden, England, Ireland and Austria: An ecosystemic analysis in evolving inclusive and special education policy landscapes

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Abstract

This paper offers a comparative analysis of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) role or equivalent, across Sweden, England, Ireland and Austria. Framed by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study investigates how inclusive education is characterised in policy and practice, and how the SENCo role is defined, enacted and supported within each jurisdiction. A hybrid methodological approach, combining a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), document analysis and the Walt and Gilson Policy Triangle, enabled analysis across the ecological system. Findings reveal that national policies vary considerably in how inclusion is defined and operationalised. The SENCo role is consistently complex and multi-layered, though its status, statutory recognition and professional preparation differ markedly. England and Sweden offer formalised structures, whereas Ireland and Austria lack explicit policy recognition, leading to inconsistent school-level enactment. Across countries, rising specialist provision, diagnostic cultures and governance pressures generate contradictions that SENCos must navigate, positioning the role within a wider wicked problem of inclusive education. The paper argues that the SENCo role should be understood as a central integrative figure within educational ecosystems, rather than a sole agent of inclusion and calls for coherent alignment across system layers and sustained policy and professional investment to support inclusive schooling.

KEYWORDS

comparative analysis, ecological systems theory, educational policy, inclusive education, SENCo

Key points

- The SENCo role operates across multiple system layers, making it inherently complex and dependent on clear policy structures, collaborative school cultures and adequate resourcing to function effectively within inclusive education systems.
- Cross-country comparisons reveal significant variation in how the SENCo role is defined, supported and enacted; statutory recognition in England and Sweden contrasts with informal, locally interpreted roles in Ireland and Austria.
- System-level contradictions such as increasing specialist provision despite national commitments to inclusion create persistent role tensions that SENCos must navigate, contributing to workload intensification and role ambiguity.

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- Strengthening the SENCo role requires coherent alignment between national policy, governance structures and school-level practices, positioning the SENCo as a boundary-spanning leader who supports whole-school inclusive development rather than acting as a sole agent of inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the role of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENcos)—the teachers often tasked with leading and managing special education provision in schools—and similar professions within education systems in England, Ireland, Sweden and Austria. This involves a comparative analysis of:

- The context of special education provision
- How the SENCo and similar roles are defined in policy and practice guidance
- Factors influencing effective SENCo practice.

Acknowledging that the role may not be identical in every country, our strategy includes examining comparable roles and professions. We will continue to use the term ‘SENCo’ to keep descriptions concise and straightforward. Our emphasis will be on the factors impacting the SENCo role within evolving and complex inclusive education systems. Inclusive education involves navigating competing demands. There is no perfect option according to Norwich (2008, p. 287) who points out that even ‘simple questions’—such as whether to label children's disabilities, determining appropriate placements and deciding on curriculum can lead to challenges. These challenges may involve stigma, devaluation, rejection or the denial of opportunities, ultimately impacting the realisation of inclusion.

To facilitate the aims of the study, the following three research questions pertaining to all four countries have been formulated:

1. How is inclusive education characterised in policy and practice?
2. How is the SENCo role characterised in policy and practice?
3. What can we learn from a comparative analysis of the SENCo role across the four countries?

Theoretical framework: Understanding the SENCo role through ecological systems theory

This research is framed by Ecological Systems Theory (EST) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and its later incorporation of the chronosystem in the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), which offers a theoretical lens

to examine the various interacting factors that shape the development of the SENCo role. This is not a novel approach; it builds on the work by Gallagher and Fitzgerald (2025a, 2025b). EST has also previously been utilised to study the SENCo role by Knowler et al. (2023) and Dobson and Douglas (2020). EST suggests that systems are recursively influenced by interactions both within and between them, enabling a broader exploration of the interconnected systems at play and underscoring the importance of these interconnected systems in shaping individual experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) (see Figure 1).

The *microsystem* represents the immediate environment of the SENCo, for example, the SENCo's direct interactions with students needing additional support and discussions with teachers and parents form part of this layer. The *mesosystem* represents the interactions and connections between different microsystems, such as collaborations with staff, parents and external professionals, as well as engagement with other SENCos in professional learning communities. The *exosystem* refers to the larger social systems that influence the SENCo, for instance, shifts in priorities or guidance from governmental education departments. In the *macrosystem*, the broader cultural context, social, political, economic and legal influences on inclusive education and resource allocation impact the SENCo role. Finally, in the *chronosystem*, temporal dimensions are important when analysing SENCos' experiences. The chronosystem also relates to an individual's developmental timeline; for instance, a newly appointed SENCo will face different experiences than an incumbent of many years.

This perspective also aligns with the notion that an inclusive education system, and by default, an inclusive school, is continually evolving and ‘on-the-move’ (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) with the SENCo role in a state of flux (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2020). While surface-level structures like policies may undergo rapid changes, deeper structures—such as attitudes and entrenched practices—tend to shift more gradually (Thomas, 2009).

The EST framework offers valuable insights into the complex, multifaceted and dynamic aspects of the SENCo role (Kay et al., 2022) within a given system. Furthermore, Ungar's (2013) concept of ‘equifinality’, the idea that elements within different systems have differential influence dependent upon context or circumstance, also contributes to this understanding. This complexity is displayed in Figure 1 by connecting the nested systems with dotted lines and incorporating a mesosystem between every part of the system. This approach spotlights

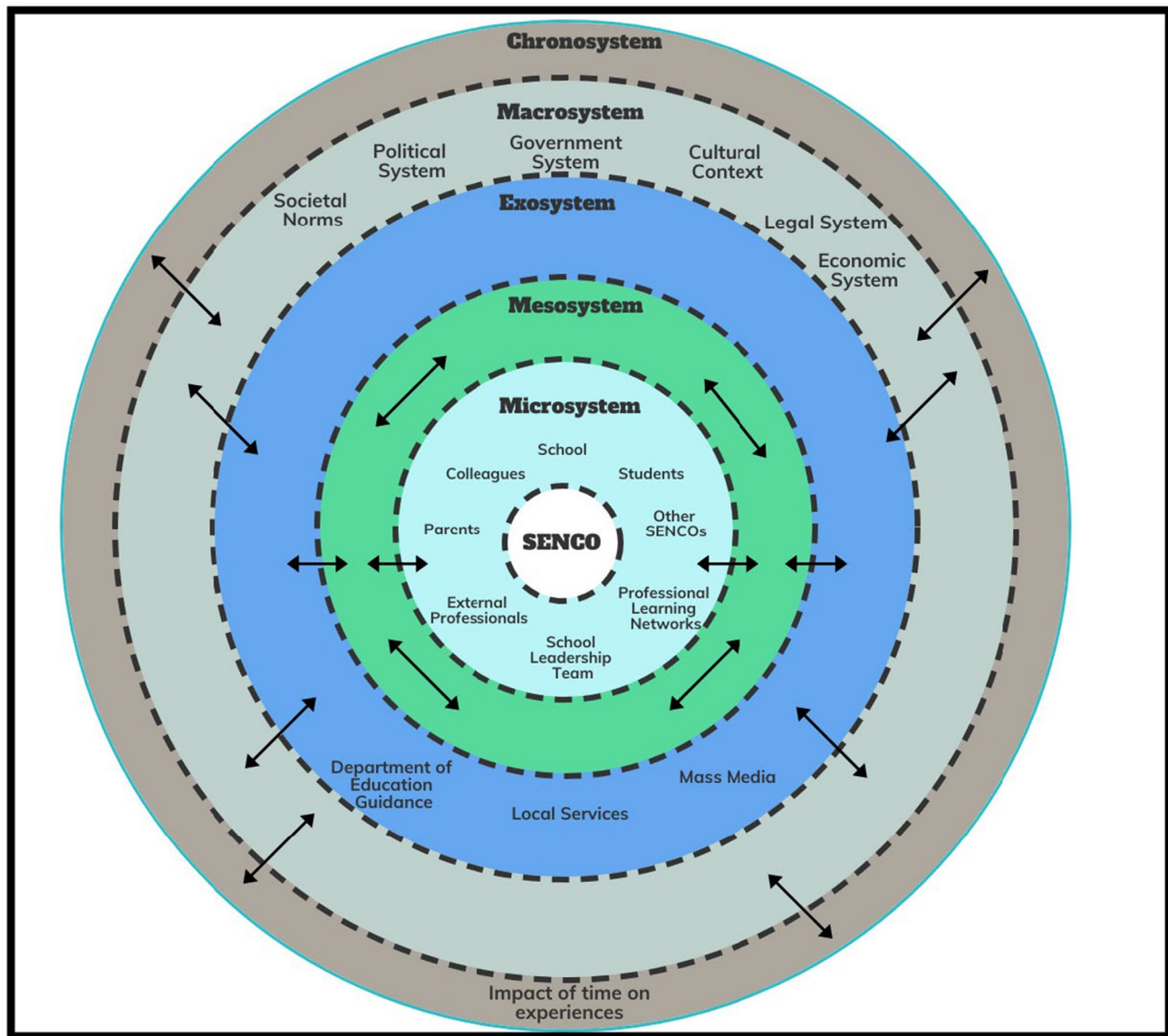


FIGURE 1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) applied to the SENCO role (Adapted, with permission, from Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a, 2025b, p. 5).

SENCOs work in the boundary-areas in school organisations and beyond (Tuomainen et al., 2011; Udd, 2024).

Research describes a role for SENCOs that is complex, challenging and contextually bound (Emmanuelsson, 2001; Fitzgerald & Radford, 2020; Norwich, 2017). While SENCO roles exist in countries including Ireland (Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a, 2025b), Sweden (Udd, 2024), England (Middleton & Kay, 2021), Hong Kong (Fong Poon-McBrayer 2012) and New Zealand (Hui et al., 2022), a discernible absence of SENCO role consistency is evident (Kay et al., 2022).

The application of EST as a theoretical lens for this paper emphasises the need for nuanced, systemic approaches to improve the SENCO role, acknowledging its dynamic nature and the broader education context. This

understanding is essential for developing effective policies that address the multifaceted challenges of special and inclusive education.

METHODS

We analysed the data using a comparative and policy-analysis framework (Esser & Vliegthart, 2017; Hopkin, 2010). The four countries, Sweden, England, Ireland and Austria, were selected because the authors possess knowledge and experience, yet differ significantly in how the SENCO role—or its equivalent—is defined, formalised or enacted. This made them suitable for MSSD, enabling examination of both convergent and divergent system features.

Document identification and selection

A systematic search of SCOPUS, ERIC, Education Research Complete and Google Scholar was conducted using search words and Boolean phrases such as: ‘SENCo’; ‘Special needs educator*’ AND inclusi*; ‘; SENCo AND inclusi*’; ‘SENCo AND Policy’; ‘Inclus* AND Policy’; ‘SENCo AND Comparative Analysis’; ‘SENCo’ AND ‘Ecological Systems Theory’. These terms reflected the focus of the study and aligned with the literature base identified in the paper. National and international policy documents were included if they:

- a. originated from statutory or government sources;
- b. concerned inclusive or special education, SEN structures or SENCo-equivalent roles; and
- c. were current or historically influential in shaping provision.

Where a country lacked a formal SENCo role (e.g. Austria), equivalent roles (e.g. Diversity Managers) were included. The full list of documents is identifiable in the reference list using asterisks.

Document analysis

Document analysis followed Bowen's (2009) structured approach:

1. Collection and screening of relevant policy texts and research literature;
2. Credibility checks, ensuring all policy texts were retrieved from official sources;
3. Thematic coding, using a deductive framework based on the research questions and an inductive layer informed by Ecological Systems Theory;
4. Synthesis, identifying patterns within and across countries.

Coding categories included: conceptualisations of inclusion, segregation, organisation of schooling for students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), special needs education, views of students with SEND, views of special needs, the definition of SENCOs' professional role and the education of SENCOs or their equivalents (See [Appendix](#)).

Comparative and policy analysis

Cross-country interpretation drew on the Walt and Gilson Policy Triangle (Walt & Gilson, 1994), examining:

- Content (policy definitions, structures, expectations),
- Actors (government agencies, school leaders, SENCo-equivalent professionals),

- Context (historical, political and cultural conditions) and
- Processes (policy formulation, implementation and enactment)

This framework provided a consistent analytical lens, complementing the MSSD approach and enabling systematic comparison of policy commitments, enactment pathways and tensions across jurisdictions.

Individual country searches yielded a total of forty-three documents: ten in Sweden, five in England, fifteen in Ireland and one in Austria (and twelve mentions in federal decrees).

Rigour and trustworthiness

Analytical rigour was strengthened through triangulation across policy documents and research literature and collaborative coding among authors. Reflexive dialogue among authors with expertise in each national context supported interpretive validity (Cohen et al., 2018).

FINDINGS

A contextual synthesis of the SENCo role across the four countries is presented under two themes: Inclusive and Special Education Policy Contexts and The SENCo Role. The analysis integrates the comparative and document-analysis frameworks outlined in the Methods: Ecological Systems Theory (EST), the Policy Triangle and the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD). These frameworks enable comparison across macro-, exo-, meso- and microsystem layers and across policy content, actors and processes.

Inclusive and special education policy contexts

Sweden

In Sweden tensions regarding inclusion seem to be prevalent within the macrosystem and between the macro and exosystem. The Swedish School Act (2010:800) mandates that all students should receive support tailored to their needs, however, ‘inclusion’ is not mentioned here nor in the ordinances for compulsory or upper secondary school (2010:2039; 2011:185). Nonetheless, through Sweden's commitment to international policies such as the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994), the CRPD (OHCR, 2006) and the Global Education 2030 agenda (UNESCO, 2015), inclusion is a central aspect of schooling in Sweden. How inclusion should be enacted in practice on a microsystemic level, however,

is a widely debated issue (Buli-Holmberg et al., 2023; Göransson et al., 2011; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017) and over the past three decades the Swedish school system has arguably moved away from the ideas which underpinned a school-for-all, the Nordic model and inclusive education (Brodin & Lindstrand, 2007; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019; Göransson et al., 2020; Magnússon, 2020; Taneja-Johansson & Powell, 2024). Instead, the Swedish school system is characterised by neoliberal governing, marketisation and an increase in special educational needs provisions in mainstream education (Giota et al., 2022; Göransson et al., 2013; Houtsonen et al., 2010; Lundahl et al., 2013; Magnússon, 2020). This indicates tensions regarding attitudes towards inclusion within the microsystemic level as well as between and within the micro, exo- and macrosystemic levels. Indeed, Sweden has been criticised for turning back towards the medical model in disability laws and for an ‘increase of segregation measures in education’ (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2024, p. 12).

In addition, in the 1990s the school system was reformed, decentralising it and deregulating it, which seems to have contributed to severe discrepancies in the microsystem between schools, municipalities and regions regarding implementation of inclusive measures. This becomes a question of equity in education, something raised by the CRPD (2024, p. 2) as well as in research into the Swedish case (Beach & Dyson, 2016; Berhanu, 2020). There has been a steady increase in the number of students needing special education provision in mainstream Swedish schools, from 5% in 2016/17 to 73,200 or 6.7% in 2024/25 (Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE), 2025a, 2025b).

A picture of an increasingly unequal Swedish school system, moving away from the idea of inclusion, the Nordic model and the concept of a school-for-all is painted. This reflects a microsystem characterised by segregation between schools, driven by macro and exo-system marketisation and segregation within schools through the implementation of special education provisions.

It is worth noting that Sweden has a dual school system, mainstream compulsory education and for students with intellectual disabilities specialist upper secondary schooling is offered following completion of compulsory education. In 2024/25, 1.5% of the student population was enrolled in compulsory schooling for students with intellectual disabilities and almost 2% was enrolled in the upper secondary equivalent (Swedish National Agency for Education, SNAE, 2025a, 2025b). There has been a continuous increase in these numbers since 2017/18, with the number of students in compulsory schooling for students with intellectual disabilities rising from 10,612 to 17,216 and those in upper secondary school for students with intellectual disabilities increasing from 6072 to 7573 students (SNAE, 2025a, 2025b).

England

As a result of the devolution of the four nations of the UK (See Keating, 2002), national legislation and guidance relating to SEND is distinct between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and this paper presents the case for England.

Tensions between the macrosystem and the exosystem are also identified in England. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) prompted moves for regular, local schools to accommodate children with SEND and to dispense with special school settings. The English government demonstrated a limited response, with the 2001 Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) and associated legislation outlining a child's right to be included within mainstream education, but with little impact being made in practice. Indeed, in spite of the decrease in numbers of special schools, from 1239 in 1997 (Select Committee on Education, 2006) to 1050 in 2024 (House of Lords Library, 2024), the numbers of students attending a special school have proportionately increased from 1.35% of total school-age pupils in 1997 to 1.76% in 2024 (DfE, 2024b). This is alongside a continuing rise of school students identified with special educational needs from 11.7% in 2017/18 to 13.6% in 2023/24 (DfE, 2024a). The stated intention of the current government, which took office in 2024, is to decrease the numbers of students in special schools and to move towards improved provision within mainstream schools.

Specific reference to inclusion and inclusive education is broadly absent from national governing documents, particularly those remaining from the previous governments. The term ‘inclusion’ is commonly used as a synonym for integrating those with SEN into an existing system, rather than as a philosophical approach.

The Academies Act (2010) marked the neo-liberal development of the commercialisation of English schools (see Hogan & Thompson 2020) which drew on now-discredited evidence from the USA Charter School process (e.g. Cohodes & Parham, 2021; The Center for Learner Equity, 2024). This legislation began the process of business ownership and running of state-funded schools, taking the accountability away from local elected authorities, although their responsibility for provision for students with SEN remains. By 2024, 82% of the 3462 secondary schools (students aged 11–16) and 43% of the 16,764 primary schools (pupils aged 5–11) were run as academies (DfE, 2024b). These developments have led to wide variation in the enactment of inclusive approaches across different microsystems.

Within the context of SEN, the National Audit Office (2019) identified an increase in real-terms spending on specialist provision provided by private settings of 32.4% between 2014 and 2018, with 17% of students attending specialist provision receiving this in independent special schools. Thomas et al. (2023) evidence ‘Cherry-picking’, ‘cream-skimming’ and ‘parking’ of students

with profiles outside of the ‘norm’ by private providers. Rustemier (2002, p. 23) suggests that a competitive neo-liberal education system hampers the adaption of mainstream schools to support children and young people with disabilities, whilst Salokangas and Ainscow (2017) identify the academisation process perpetuating the exclusion of certain groups. Liu et al. (2020) evidenced that academy schools were more likely to decrease the proportion of students with SEND and remove additional support for them.

Significant tensions exist between the exosystem and the microsystems local school settings. The resourcing of provision for students identified with SEND remains the responsibility of local authorities, with much of this delegated to individual schools. Where students have more significant needs, resourcing is allocated through a complex system of identification and funding based on a psycho-medical and categorisation model. Within the context of a segregated system of schooling on several levels, and a standards-focussed approach which can be seen to perpetuate inequality (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 167), a widescale government review of the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system is underway. Following the publication of the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2014), where there were high hopes for an improved experience for children and young people and their families, wide recognition grew of the failure of the system to effectively provide for students with SEND. Reports highlighted, ‘A system beset with serious problems’ (Local Government Ombudsman, 2019, p. 2) and over 50% of Local Area SEND Inspection outcomes between 2016 and 2022 identified serious weaknesses (OFSTED, 2022).

In 2022, the government implemented a major national consultation with stakeholders of the SEND system. Following a process of delays and broken deadlines, an improvement plan (Secretary of State for Education, 2023) was produced to address the failings of the system. With the advent of the new government in 2024, a new consultation into solutions to improve the SEND system was undertaken, with the expected publication of another improvement plan in 2026.

Ireland

Ireland presents a macrosystem committed to inclusive education, which is recognised as a right for children and young people with SEND. This right is enshrined in legislation, including, for example, the Education Act 1998, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 and the Disability Act 2005. National reforms are shaped by international declarations such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (UN, 2006). However,

a lack of an operational definition of inclusion creates ambiguity within the policy content, contributing to inconsistent interpretations at the exosystem and mesosystem levels (Shevlin & Banks, 2021; Winter & O’Raw, 2010).

At the exosystem level, the past decade has witnessed significant policy reform and turbulence in reimagining special education provision (Shevlin & Banks, 2021). The system remains under construction, with multiple consultations underway to support the progressive realisation of an inclusive education system (National Council for Special Education, 2024). A recent review of the EPSEN Act (Department of Education and Youth (DEY), 2025)—which was never fully implemented—recommends legislative change to include all school-age children under one Act (DEY, 2025, p. 92), aiming for systemic coherence and a unified legislative basis aligned with CRPD. At the exosystem level, the NCSE plays a central role in resource allocation and policy implementation. Yet rapid system change, especially in relation to the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (Department of Education, 2024) has generated uncertainty around implementation processes at micro- and meso- system levels.

The vision for an inclusive education system remains arguably aspirational as specialist provision in Ireland continues to grow, reflecting tensions between macrosystem commitments to inclusion and exosystem patterns of provision expansion (Travers, 2023). Like other European jurisdictions, Ireland has seen a marked increase in special schools and classes (Buchner & Proyer, 2020; Ebersold 2011; NCSE, 2024). The NCSE notes rising demand for additional support, with around 30,000 students now in specialist settings—a 67% increase since 2020, representing 3.7% of the school-aged population. By 2030, an estimated 5% of students will attend specialist settings, mirroring wider European trends where macrosystem policies promoting inclusion co-exist with exosystem drivers that reinforce segregated pathways (Department of Education, 2024; NCSE, 2024).

Alongside this growth, exosystemic policy reform is shifting from a psycho-medical to a psycho-social understanding of difference, supported by a bio-psycho-social framework that reframes how needs are conceptualised within the educational macrosystem (National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), 2010). This shift underpins reforms such as the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (SETAM) (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2017; Department of Education, 2024), which prioritises needs-based rather than diagnosis-based allocation, replacing earlier pathologising, label-dependent models that shaped microsystem interactions with students (National Council for Special Education, 2014; Rose et al., 2015).

Despite this shift, medicalised and categorical approaches persist, particularly in special class and special

school placements, revealing contradictions across macro-, exo- and mesosystem layers and generating confusion for practitioners (Travers, 2023). Since the adoption of the needs-based model in 2017, the number of students accessing special education has grown, amplifying microsystem pressures on teachers and influencing the mesosystem functioning of schools. This expansion has significantly impacted the roles and workloads of Special Education Teachers (SETs) and SENCOs, who increasingly navigate competing system demands across multiple ecological layers (Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023; Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a, 2025b).

EST helps illustrate that while the macrosystem (legislation and national policy) signals inclusive intent, mesosystem coordination remains incomplete and microsystem practice continues to be shaped by both historical diagnostic cultures and emerging needs-based approaches.

Austria

Austria has a strongly segregated school system. This entails: an established special education system that is historically deeply rooted in special education parallel to integrative and so-called inclusive settings. This macro-systemic impact was also mirrored in teacher training and segregated preparation of special educators until 2016 (Buchner & Proyer, 2020). Additionally, the Austrian education system is characterised by early segregation in the general and academic track (at the age of 10, level 4) (Baysu & de Valk, 2012). Limited placement options in the academic track usually imply selected access to higher education. An additional circumstance that affects equal education access entails only 1 year of mandatory kindergarten attendance. Decision-making to determine attendance in kindergarten for additional years is interrelated with family structure, income and other microsystem level factors. As the education system is based on a monolingual approach geared towards German as the main language of instruction and the basis for entering general education, children who access early education later and have other first languages might experience disadvantages in educational transitions (Böck, 2017). Overall, there is a clear macrosystem socio-demographic linkage between gaining access to higher education tracks and migration biography, educational background of legal guardians and disability.

Two National Action Plans and an evaluation report point to barriers to the implementation of an inclusive school system, despite the implementation of the UNCRPD. In its initial version (2008), the term inclusion was translated as the German equivalent to 'integration' and so, many goals remained fuzzy in terms of inclusion. Pressure from Disabled People's Organisations, disability activists and academia led to the publication of an Austrian version of the UNCRPD (BMASK, 2016).

One of the major changes with impact from the exo- to the micro-system came in the early 1990s, when the decision of which type of school a child should attend was transferred to parents. Not only do children have a right to education close to their residence, but parents are (in theory) expected to choose between special education or integrative school settings, which later evolved into inclusive settings (Biewer, 2023). However, schools often refuse admission to children with disabilities, citing perceived barriers or a lack of resources as reasons. The complex interplay of factors leading to higher probabilities of unequal access to education can be illustrated by, for example, the overrepresentation of children whose first language is not German in SEN statistics (Gasteiger-Klicpera et al., 2023; Subasi Singh, 2020).

Data on the number of children with SEN vary depending on data sources (e.g. national census, school authority) across the nine counties (Gasteiger-Klicpera et al., 2023). In the academic school year 2021/22 between 27,652 and 30,217 children were registered as having a SEN in Austria, depending on the source referred to. In 2022 an approximate number of 26,000 students were identified as having a SEN. However, a study conducted in 2022 and 2023 revealed that around 12% fewer children were identified compared to the 2021/2022 school year (Gasteiger-Klicpera et al., 2023).

In 2019 the SEN procedures were re-invented. One of the main aims was to streamline the procedure nationwide and introduce the legal department of the school boards as decision-making bodies. Research indicates that this process is ongoing (Gasteiger-Klicpera et al., 2023). Due to variations in federal educational policies operating across exosystem levels, the nine counties in Austria exhibit significant differences in types of schooling for children with SEN, affecting all levels of the ecological model. The percentages of children with SEN receiving education outside of specialist settings (integrative or inclusive) vary between above 42% and over 80% (Gasteiger-Klicpera et al., 2023).

The SENCO role

Sweden

SENCOs' professional role in Sweden

SENCOs work in collaboration with professionals within (microsystem) as well as outside of school (mesosystem), moving between all levels of organisation in schools (Göransson et al., 2015; Klang et al., 2017). SENCOs are dependent on well-functioning relationships with other professionals and with students with SEND to fulfil their responsibilities (Aspelin et al., 2021; Udd & Berndtsson, 2023). However, SENCOs also face challenges when it comes to demarcating their role and advocating for their professional standing in relation to other agents both within and outside of the school

(Klang et al., 2017; Magnússon & Göransson, 2019). Moreover, various macro- and exosystem interpretations of how inclusion should be understood and enacted in practice seem to exacerbate tensions for SENCOs trying to fulfil their responsibilities (Göransson et al., 2017, 2019; Udd, 2024). Framed in the EST model it is notable that the SENCO in the Swedish case collaborates with a plethora of different agents in the microsystem as well as bridging the mesosystem, collaborating with agents in the exosystem. Thereby, SENCOs function as the communicative hub or the spider in the EST-web.

SENCO education in Sweden

The SENCO training programme in Sweden is a part-time postgraduate programme, comprising 90 higher education credits. To be eligible for application, candidates must have at least 3 years of experience as teachers or other relevant professions such as after-school teachers. The training objectives are divided into three categories: (i) Knowledge and Comprehension, (ii) Competence and Skills and (iii) Judgement and Approach (SFS 2017:1111).

SENCOs in policy in Sweden

The Swedish School Act (SFS 2010:800) does not state that each school must have a designated person serving as a SENCO. Instead, it emphasises that the role and competence should exist within the student health team. Furthermore, the role/title of SENCO (special pedagogue) is not protected, which means that anyone considered to have the necessary skills could be employed as a SENCO, even if they have not completed the SENCO training programme. Notably, the title of Special Educational Teachers (SETs) is a protected designation awarded following successful completion of the SET training programme. It is worth noting that the curricula for both training programmes are similar (SFS 2017:1111), and SENCOs and SETs often learn together extensively during their education. This raises questions regarding the legitimacy of the SENCO role in relation to SETs, particularly in terms of their respective professionalisation processes and the importance of asserting professional jurisdiction in this context.

England

SENCOs' professional role in England

The SENCO role is well established across exo, meso and micro-systems in England, having first been identified in policy in 1994 (see DfE (Department for Education), 1994). Since this time the role has changed from one focused on pedagogical activities in support of individual students to a role involving strategic leadership (Ekins, 2015). The SENCO role is school-based and

defined in current policy as having eleven key responsibilities, with overseeing and coordinating the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy in line with key legislation (DfE/DoH, 2014, 6.90, pp. 10–109). The reality of the SENCO role in practice is that, alongside their strategic role, the SENCO frequently continues to take on pedagogical responsibilities for individual students, as well as supporting adults, both staff and parents, to manage the challenges of the school and SEN system (Middleton & Kay, 2021).

Local authorities maintain overall mesosystem level responsibility for provision for individual students identified with SEN. Within the current context of local authority under-funding, misaligned incentives and the consequent diminishing of support services (ISOS Partnership, 2024), parents of children and young people with SEND are situated in a 'battle ground' (LGO, 2019, p. 2) to ensure appropriate support for their children. SENCOs find themselves in a difficult position in relation to their role to carry out the duties of the local authority (Children and Families Act, 2014) and advocate, to their best endeavours, for the best possible educational outcomes for students with SEND, following the 'views, wishes and feelings of the child and his or her parent' (Children and Families Act, 2014, S.19).

The SENCO role operates across the microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem, within multidirectional spheres of influence. Particular influence exists from the exosystem, where Local Authority control of access to resources leads to significant interactions.

SENCO education in England

Until September 2024, the legislation also stipulated that the SENCO should gain the National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination (NASENCO) qualification within 3 years of appointment as SENCO. This award was identified as a Postgraduate Certificate in Education within the English university system and had nationally recognised learning outcomes. It is estimated that between 3000 and 5000 teachers were studying annually for the NASENCO.

In 2024, the legislation was amended, altering the expectations for SENCO training. This was widely perceived as a predetermined political decision, rather than a response to government consultation processes (Robertson, 2023a). Since October 2024, the SENCO needs to achieve a National Professional Qualification (NPQ) in SEN Coordination. NPQs are not accredited within the Higher Education university system and are delivered by private training companies who use multiple delivery partners. A response to these changes at proposal stage came from the Universities Council for Education of Teachers (UCET, 2022, p. 16), stating that using the NPQ framework for SENCO development implemented a 'narrow definition of what a teacher/school should be' and that the changes would deprofessionalise and diminish the teacher role. Additionally,

concern about the nature of learning outcomes of the new qualification has been raised, particularly regarding:

- a lack of clarity about the leadership elements of the SENCo role;
- the lack of focus on professional understanding and critical reflection; and
- the minimal connection between the curriculum and relevant literature on the SENCo role (Robertson, 2023b, p. 493)

Currently, no substantive evaluation of the new training route for SENCos in England has been undertaken.

SENCos in policy in England

The SENCo role is outlined in the statutory guidance, the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2014), as holding responsibility for the coordination and operationalisation of school policy, provision and practice for students identified with special educational needs. Furthermore, eleven key responsibilities are defined for the SENCo. It is recommended that the SENCo be included in the school Senior Leadership Team; however, successive reviews have failed to make this mandatory. The legislation behind this guidance, the Children and Families Act (2014), states that all schools must have a SENCo, who should be a qualified teacher.

Ireland

SENCos' professional role in Ireland

In Ireland, the SENCo role operates at microsystem and mesosystem levels in practice but not in national exosystem policy (Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023; Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a, 2025b), with ongoing debate about whether such exosystem ambiguity supports shared responsibility or hinders inclusive practice (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2020). The role has developed informally in response to school-level needs and broader inclusion reforms, developing within a policy vacuum that creates inconsistency across mesosystem contexts (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017, 2020; Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a, 2025b). Lack of clarity around expectations poses challenges for SENCos and colleagues as they navigate differing microsystem demands and exosystem pressures (Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023; Fitzgerald & Radford, 2020; Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a, 2025b; O'Sullivan et al., 2025). This confusion reflects the diffused and seemingly boundless nature of the role, which spans multiple ecological layers (Busher & Harris, 2000; Fitzgerald & Radford, 2020). Without a formal job specification and with limited recognition and unsustainable workload, much of their work remains invisible across systems, contributing to isolation in the microsystem of daily practice (Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023; Fitzgerald & Radford, 2020;

Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a, 2025b; O'Sullivan et al., 2025). Despite these pressures, many report fulfilment and job satisfaction through relational aspects of the role (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2020; Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a, 2025b; O'Sullivan et al., 2025).

Historically, SENCos worked mainly at the microsystem level through operational and teaching duties (Fitzgerald et al., 2021). After the 2017 shift towards needs-based approaches to provision the role moved into mesosystem leadership, often regardless of personal preference (Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023; Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a). Their responsibilities now include management of teams, digital data systems, professional development, mentoring, coaching and multidisciplinary collaboration, alongside teaching (Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023; Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a). This expansion increases bureaucracy, workload and accountability for both SENCos and senior leaders (Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a, 2025b). While research recognises the leadership dimension of the role (Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023; Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017, 2020; Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a, 2025b), not all SENCos seek leadership, sometimes viewing it as a barrier to collaboration across microsystems (Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023; Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017, 2020; Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a, 2025b). This creates dilemmas about formalising the role within exosystem policy and school structures (Fitzgerald et al., 2021). Ring-fencing expertise may unintentionally isolate SENCos within the mesosystem, positioning them as solely responsible for SEND provision and exacerbating role unsustainability (Fitzgerald, 2022).

SENCo Education in Ireland

Like in Sweden, SENCos in Ireland are not required to hold specific SEN-related qualifications; however, ongoing professional learning is strongly encouraged and widely pursued (Castro-Kemp et al., 2025; Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a, 2025b). Within an EST framework, this reflects a macrosystem context that values teacher autonomy while relying on exosystem structures such as the National Council for Special Education Support Service, to provide professional development opportunities. These opportunities include short courses, seminars, school visits and workshops alongside mesosystem communities of practice and professional learning networks through school management bodies, Education Centres or higher education institutions (Fitzgerald, 2022; Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a, 2025b).

Formal qualifications, funded by the Department of Education and Youth (DEY), such as the 90-credit Post-Graduate Diploma Programme for Special Education Teachers (DEY, 2025), are offered across six Irish universities. Eligible teachers must hold substantive posts and be involved in special education teaching. DEY funding supports an eight-week substituted block release for university attendance, and the programme includes an

assessed teaching practicum, strengthening microsystem practice through direct application in classrooms. The programme aims to strengthen both theoretical understanding and practical competence for teachers working with students with SEND, thereby enhancing overall mesosystem capacity (DEY, 2025). Because each university independently designs its programme and learning outcomes, content varies across institutions, reflecting exosystem diversity and the absence of centralised macrosystem guidance on competencies or frameworks.

Although this qualification does not formally recognise the SENCo role, recent research by Gallagher and Fitzgerald (2025a, 2025b) shows it provides an important foundation for the role's development. Their mixed-methods study with 371 surveyed SENCos and nine interviewees found that SENCos seek a dedicated postgraduate qualification tailored to their mesosystem leadership responsibilities, along with continued access to collaborative microsystem and mesosystem communities of practice where they can share learning, strengthen professional identity and navigate systemic complexity.

SENCos in policy in Ireland

The SENCo role is not formally recognised in Irish exosystem policy, where principals are identified as having ultimate responsibility for the delivery of special education provision in schools. This positioning reflects an exosystem framing of leadership that emphasises whole-school responsibility rather than the designation of a specific coordinating role. Within this structure, exosystem policy documents—such as the Guidelines and related documents for Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Classes (DEY, 2024)—reference Special Education Teachers (SETs) and the development of a core schoolwide special education team but make no explicit provision for a SENCo-type role.

At the mesosystem level, schools interpret and operationalise these guidelines independently, leading to variation in how coordination, assessment, resource allocation and support structures are organised. Without a formal SENCo policy position anchoring expectations across systems, school-level actors assume different responsibilities, resulting in inconsistent role enactment within microsystem daily practice (Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a).

A notable development emerged in the Review of the EPSEN Act (DEY, 2025), where the term SENCo appeared for the first time in an official document. The report recommends supports to strengthen the coordination role and proposes the possible rotation of responsibilities to avoid burnout and isolation. This proposal reflects awareness of the microsystem pressures SENCos face, the mesosystem need for shared leadership within schools and the exosystem challenge of sustaining a role that lacks formal policy footing. While the recommendation signals tentative macrosystem recognition, it simultaneously highlights uncertainty about how the role should be conceptualised, governed and resourced.

Austria

SENCo's professional role and education in Austria

In comparison to the other three countries, the professional role of a SENCo has so far not been formally introduced in Austria. Given knowledge about international profiles, the role closest to the SENCo can be identified as the *Diversitätsmanager:innen*, literally translated as, Diversity Managers. Given the broad definition of their role, currently, the 109 positions are held by a variety of and, so far, not specifically trained. Who usually bring years of practical experience working as teachers. Their responsibilities include:

- Regulation of inclusive developments in collaboration with school quality management.
- Provision of expertise in inclusion, diversity and special needs education.
- Development of SEN reports.
- Identification of further support needs
- Support of regional implementation of reform projects in the area of education policy.
- Counselling of parents and legal guardians and schools (Wien, 2023).

Their field of expertise is either related to a specific geographic area or a specific topic, such as, for example, one of 23 Viennese districts or 'Autism'.

SENCos in policy in Austria

The Diversity Manager role was implemented in 2019 alongside broad administrative reforms in the context of school administration and quality assurance. Under the section, Inclusion, Diversity and Special Needs Education/Educational Services/Law of Boards of Education (Bildungsdirektionen-Einrichtungsgesetz, BGBl. I Nr. 138/2017, § 19, 2019) their role incorporates: 'Provision and coordination of special needs and inclusion-oriented measures for students with SEN and other support needs in general schools, including support of not only students but respective teachers.' (translated from Wien, 2023). The implementation of the role is part of a range of developments in the Austrian education system, geared towards implementing inclusive education. Since 2011, for example, teacher preparation has undergone significant change (Buchner & Proyer, 2020; Paudel & Subasi Singh, 2020) and is currently under review again. Since 2016, both at the level of primary and secondary education, teacher preparation was infused by inclusive education. Special education preparation was stopped while inclusive education was implemented within general education but also introduced as a specialisation (one of two subjects in secondary education).

The work of Diversity Managers has, so far, only been explored regarding their role in changes in the SEN assignment procedures. They report multiple challenges such as high caseloads and too diversified questions

addressed to them; also, the issue of being confronted by wicked problems and different rules in different counties affects their work (Gasteiger-Klicpera et al., 2023).

While the role of diversity managers operating in mesosystems has the potential to connect exosystem—policy to microsystem enactment and implementation and conversely impact policy work via communicating needs from practice, their impact remains limited to the microsystem and direct interaction with the practical sphere.

Cross-country comparative synthesis of SENCo role

The third research question asked: What can we learn from a comparative analysis of the SENCo role across the four countries? The findings suggest that, despite significant contextual variation, there are clear similarities and differences in how the SENCo role is conceptualised, enacted and supported across Sweden, England, Ireland and Austria. Drawing on the hybrid analytical framework used in this study—Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), the Policy Triangle and Ecological Systems Theory (EST)—the comparative synthesis reveals how interactions across macro-, exo-, meso- and microsystem layers shape the conditions in which SENCos operate.

Despite differing system structures, common patterns emerge through alignment with supranational frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement, the CRPD and the 2030 Agenda. However, the comparative analysis shows that these commitments do not translate consistently into exosystem policies, governance structures or resourcing arrangements. Instead, each country navigates its own tensions between national aspirations for inclusion and practical realities on the ground. For example, Sweden and England show how marketisation, decentralisation and competitive schooling models (academisation in the case of England) can undermine inclusive intentions by driving increased specialist provision. Ireland illustrates a strong legal basis for inclusion yet exhibits operational vagueness and rising specialist placements. Austria continues to operate a structurally segregated system with marked regional differences.

How is the SENCo role characterised in policy and practice?

Some similarities emerge between the SENCo role or equivalent roles, across countries. In all settings, SENCos (or equivalents) are expected to undertake multifaceted responsibilities that span strategic leadership, collaboration, administrative coordination and direct pedagogical support. Workload and role ambiguity are common challenges, particularly where boundaries between strategic and operational tasks are

blurred. In every country except England, SENCos lack formal leadership status, and there is an ongoing discussion about their inclusion in senior leadership teams. Policies in England support, but do not mandate, a senior leadership position for SENCos and two thirds of SENCos in secondary schools report not being part of their school leadership team (Boddison et al., 2021).

Policy ambiguity or lack of formal policy recognition of the SENCo role is a feature in Sweden, Ireland and Austria. Where leadership status is absent or unclear, the role is more vulnerable to local interpretation, contributing to inconsistency at the mesosystem and microsystem levels.

Distinct and opaque differences further illuminate how the SENCo role is conceptualised, operationalised and supported in each country. England and Sweden maintain statutory or quasi-statutory recognition of the SENCo, while Ireland and Austria do not. In Austria, SENCo-equivalent roles exist at the exosystem level (Diversity Managers) rather than at the school-based meso and microsystem levels, distinguishing the Austrian model from the other three countries. Ireland exemplifies a role that exists entirely within school-level practice without formal policy anchoring, a finding that underscores how the absence of macrosystem recognition reverberates across ecological layers, generating greater variation in role enactment. Centralised measures of quality control also increasingly impact teachers in Austria.

From an ecological systems perspective, the opacity pertaining to the SENCo positioned within interconnected and interrelated nested systems reflects shifting politics, policies and practices across countries. Regarding explicit reference to inclusion in national governing documents, Sweden stands out: it omits the term from national governing documents for schools and the degree ordinance of the SENCo preparation programme. In English policy, inclusion has a small presence, and within the ordinance of the SENCo preparation guidance, is mentioned just four times in a document exceeding 10,000 words. In Austrian policy, the concept of inclusion is interpreted as integration, raising questions about whether inclusion is, in fact, an explicit component of Austrian policy. In Ireland, inclusion reflects a continuum of provision and a commitment (but not yet a reality) to educating all children in their local communities, as articulated in the NCSE Policy Advice 'An Inclusive Education for An Inclusive Society' (NCSE, 2024).

Professional development also varies notably across contexts. Formal postgraduate qualifications are available in every country. In England and Sweden, specific preparation is mandatory for SENCos, providing structural reliability and professional status. However, in Ireland and Austria, while such qualifications are accessible, SENCos or Diversity Managers are not required to hold any formal credentials, resulting in greater local variability. While SENCo education is a feature in

Sweden, England and Ireland, as mentioned above, its structure differs. In Sweden and Ireland, SENCo/SET education comprises a postgraduate level programme, with an equivalent 90 higher education credits, whereas in England the SENCo training programme was recently demoted from the NASENCo to an NPQ, raising concerns about professional status. In Austria, no specific SENCo preparation exists; Diversity Managers rely on general teaching experience. This comparative insight shows that exosystem structures such as national education pathways play a critical role in shaping the coherence and sustainability of SENCo practice.

Another important cross-country difference concerns approaches to addressing student needs. Ireland's move from a diagnostic to a needs-based allocation model has created new contradictions and co-existing diagnostic pathways, while Austria retains a medically dominated identification system. England claims a needs-based focus, yet diagnostic pathways continue to shape access to support (see, for example Alston, 2025). Conversely, Sweden has a long-standing tradition of implementing a human rights-based approach to students' needs within its policy but appears to be shifting towards more diagnostic practices. Despite varying practices in different counties, such as inclusion of ICF (International Classification of Functioning Disability and Health), the importance of medical documentation remains strong throughout (Gasteiger-Klicpera et al., 2023). These differences illustrate how macrosystem ideologies and exosystem identification procedures directly influence SENCo responsibilities, shaping day-to-day practice at the microsystem level. Overall, the comparative analysis reveals the SENCo profession is profoundly shaped by system design, and its challenges and contradictions arise not only from role ambiguity but from deeper ecological misalignments across policy layers. In all four countries, SENCos operate as boundary-spanning professionals navigating complex intersections of policy, governance, school culture and learner need. The variability in how the role is defined, supported and enacted across systems highlights the need to conceptualise the SENCo not as a single, uniform position but as one that emerges through local interactions within nested systems. Ultimately, the cross-country synthesis suggests that strengthening the SENCo role requires greater coherence across macro-, exo-, meso- and microsystem layers, recognising that its success depends on alignment across the entire educational ecosystem.

DISCUSSION

The differences and similarities emerging across the four countries indicate there are ongoing issues, dilemmas and contradictions within inclusive education and in how the SENCo role is understood and enacted. From an EST perspective, these challenges reflect persistent

interactions and tensions across macro-, exo-, meso- and microsystem layers, demonstrating how political shifts, policy developments and school-level practices continually reshape the SENCo's remit.

The SENCo role seems to be both sought after and contested concurrently across all systems. It is linked to an inclusive ethos, yet its practical enactment is influenced by complex politicised, conceptual and organisational conditions (see for example, Armstrong et al., 2010; Imray & Colley, 2017). Such multidirectional influences emphasise why the role is characterised by inherent dilemmas and can vary so much between schools and countries.

Across the microsystem, SENCos navigate highly relational work, supporting students, teachers and families while also responding to immediate needs. Their mesosystem positioning means they frequently serve as boundary workers who connect classroom practice with wider school systems (Udd, 2024). Where formal policy recognition exists, it supports strategic leadership and legitimacy and offers clearer expectations: however, this was found to be uneven across countries. England and Sweden provide statutory or quasi-statutory recognition, whereas Ireland and Austria do not, leading to a greater degree of local interpretation, autonomy and role ambiguity at the mesosystem level. This creates a tension between desired autonomy and the need for structural clarity. Nonetheless, we acknowledge the inherent contradiction here; any formalisation of the role impacts the level of autonomy or flexible interpretation at local level, thus requiring a balance to be struck.

The exosystem further influences how the role is shaped. Governance mechanisms, funding arrangements, accountability systems and teacher education structures differ significantly across jurisdictions, shaping the SENCo's scope and capacity. Neoliberal tendencies and the rise in segregated solutions and issues concerning declining equality and equity in education seem to intertwine with the responsibilities of SENCos, creating barriers to their efforts in enacting inclusion in practice. In England, these manifest through local authority pressures, marketisation and accountability demands, which complicate enactment. Sweden's decentralisation and market-driven reforms have generated inconsistencies between municipalities. Ireland's absence of formal SENCo policy results in variability at school level and threatens its sustainability, while Austria's regionally governed, segregated model positions SENCo-equivalent Diversity Managers primarily at the exosystem rather than the mesosystem. These cross-country contrasts highlight the importance of coherent governance structures in shaping stable and sustainable SENCo practice.

Professional learning also reflects system differences. Mandatory postgraduate SENCo qualifications in Sweden and (formerly) England provide strong exosystem anchors for the role. Ireland and Austria offer

qualifications but do not require them, resulting in more uneven professional preparation. Nonetheless, Irish communities of practice (Wenger 1998) show the potential of mesosystem collaborations to reduce isolation and strengthen shared learning (Gallagher & Fitzgerald, 2025a, 2025b). Such examples illustrate how mesosystem practices can compensate for exosystem gaps.

At the macrosystem level, national and international policy discourses and system design influence how SENCOs operate. Sweden and England, despite long-standing commitments to inclusive rhetoric, demonstrate how neoliberal tendencies such as marketisation, parental choice and accountability pressures can exacerbate specialist provision and widen gaps between policy vision and practice. Ireland's legislative commitments co-exist with operational vagueness, contributing to rising specialist placements and revealing unresolved tensions across ecological layers. Austria's historically segregated approach and reliance on medicalised identification shape a distinct conceptualisation of the role. These findings indicate that macrosystem values and structures heavily influence professional identity, role legitimacy and system-level coherence.

The comparative analysis also reveals the difficulty of defining or operationalising 'inclusion.' Across countries, inclusion is conceptualised differently; sometimes absent from policy (Sweden), minimally referenced (England), framed as integration (Austria) or positioned as a continuum of provision (Ireland). These differences create practical barriers for SENCOs, who must interpret and enact contested concepts in their microsystem work. Depending on school culture, resources and leadership, these conceptual inconsistencies can either support collective capacity or isolate SENCOs. In school systems that promote collaborative and distributive cultures of shared responsibility, SENCO leadership can foster collective efforts and build pedagogical capacity across the school. Conversely, in school systems characterised by individualism, SENCO leadership and expertise may lead to the isolation of the SENCO, placing the weight of responsibility for students with SEND solely on them. Similarly, depending on the approaches adopted to support the needs of students with SEND, SENCOs can build teacher capacity for inclusive practice through models of co-teaching and collaborative planning.

Neoliberal influences, increased specialisation and equity concerns intersect strongly with SENCO responsibilities. The SENCO role is therefore shaped not only by immediate school demands but by wider systemic pressures. These ecological dynamics help clarify why the SENCO position is complex, highly sensitive to contextual changes and often difficult to sustain.

Given the findings in this paper, we propose that the SENCO's role is situated within a wicked problem. Wicked problems are characterised by social complexity, contradictions and resistance to solutions due to

complicated interdependencies and diverse stakeholder perspectives (Rittel & Webber, 1973). The field of inclusive education and special educational needs has been situated as a wicked area (see, for example, Done, 2025; Määttä et al., 2024; Fitzgerald, 2021; Qu, 2022; Middleton, 2019). Whilst previous research has identified the contextual challenges and complexities of the SENCO role (Emmanuelsson, 2001; Fitzgerald & Radford, 2020; Norwich, 2017), this paper suggests that the SENCO role can be understood as a wicked problem. The paper has identified contradictions and complexities of the ecosystemic interactions that SENCOs experience through policy enactment, characterised by shifting intersections with inclusive education, changing approaches to the professional role of the SENCO and local circumstances and relationships which act as barriers to the development of inclusive educational strategies. These systemic barriers are complex in their nature and are wicked in that they preclude solutions which can be generalised, are simple or linear (Armstrong, 2017).

CONCLUSION

In this article, the SENCO is identified as one of many attempts to address increasing complexity within inclusive schooling for all children and young people. Rather than providing definitive answers on how to approach or define the SENCO's role—an impossible task given the nature of these interrelated and interdependent complexities—the study raises several questions. Through the comparative and ecosystemic analysis, it becomes evident that the SENCO appears to be spread too thinly to address the various dilemmas, tensions and contradictions present within the broader ecology of schooling or, in the words of Tolkien (1991, p. 45), the SENCO is 'stretched ... like butter that has been scraped over too much bread'.

The ecological analysis demonstrates that the SENCO's work is embedded within broader system architectures that are themselves in flux and often unaligned. As a result, the SENCO risks being perceived either as the adhesive holding together fragmented elements of the system or conversely, as the scapegoat for the shortcomings of inclusive provision. This reinforces the need for whole-system investment, rather than reliance on a single professional role to resolve systemic inequities or inconsistencies.

Several questions emerge regarding the agency of SENCOs and how it relates to their professional boundaries and jurisdiction across ecological layers; the extent to which the role should be formalised in policy; and how SENCO preparation programmes can be better aligned with the realities of the role. Likewise, whether SENCOs should function as middle leaders or be integrated into senior leadership teams remains dependent on the nature of the ecological challenges and wicked problems

they are expected to address. In systems where inclusive practice is distributed and collaborative, SENCo leadership has the potential to strengthen capacity. In more individualised systems characterised by accountability pressures or marketised structures, formal leadership may isolate the role or intensify workload rather than enable systemic improvement.

Considering these findings, we ask: is it time to reimagine the SENCo role? Reimagining it, not as a solution to inclusion, but as the hub that connects the various ecosystemic layers of schooling making it a cohesive whole. From an EST perspective, the SENCo is most accurately understood as a professional who operates across boundaries, connecting classroom practice with school-level systems and bridging macro- and exo-level policies with microsystem realities. Rather than viewing the SENCo as solely responsible for inclusion or for addressing the needs of students with SEND, the role may be more productively defined by its capacity to create coherence across system layers and facilitate integrative structures. This repositioning also raises the need to reassess SENCo preparation programmes, policy articulation and leadership expectations in ways that align with the complex ecological terrain within which the role exists. Ultimately, recognising the SENCo as a boundary-spanning, system-connecting actor or 'glue', rather than as a stand-alone solution, allows for a more realistic and sustainable understanding of the role. Strengthening inclusion in practice requires alignment across all ecological layers: coherent national policy, supportive governance, collaborative school cultures and protected conditions for microsystem work. Only when these systems align can the SENCo fulfil their potential as a vital integrative figure within inclusive education, rather than being overburdened by responsibilities that no single role can reasonably bear.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Jonas Udd: Conceptualization; methodology; investigation; visualization; formal analysis; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Johanna Fitzgerald:** Conceptualization; methodology; investigation; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; formal analysis. **Michelle Proyer:** Conceptualization; methodology; formal analysis; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; visualization. **Tristan Middleton:** Conceptualization; methodology; investigation; formal analysis; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; project administration.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

No empirical data were collected for the Austrian case. No empirical data were collected for the Swedish case. No empirical data were collected for the English case. No empirical data were collected for the Irish case.

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APPENDIX

Coding Characteristics

The analysis was conducted by identifying characteristics in each country relating to inclusion, segregation, organisation of schooling for students in SEND, special needs education, views of students in SEND, views of special needs and the definition of SENCOs' professional role and the education of SENCOs or the equivalent of SENCOs. The characteristics identified in each country are illustrated in Table A1.

TABLE A1 Policy analysis coding characteristics.

Characteristics	Austria	England	Ireland	Sweden
Special schools	X	X	X	X
Inclusion defined in national governing documents	X (ambiguous)	X (limited references)	X (ambiguous)	No
Needs-based approach	X	X (limited references)	Needs-based in mainstream; diagnosis led for specialist placements	For placement in special schools for students with intellectual disabilities
Human rights-based approach	X (ambiguous)	No	X	X
Diagnosis-led categorical approach	X	X	For placement in special classes and special schools	For placement in special schools for students with intellectual disabilities
Commitment to international policy on inclusion	X	X	X	X
Formal acknowledgement of the SENCO role	No	X	No	X
Formal education of SENCOs	No	X	No	X
Decentralised school system	X	X	No	X
Marketisation of schooling	No	X	No	X
Neoliberal influences	X	X	No	X
Freedom of choice among parents regarding which school their children with SEND should attend	X	X	X	X
Moving towards segregating solutions in mainstream school	X (ambiguous)	X	X	X
Increase in number of students in SEN	Fixed number	X	X	X
Increase of number of students in special schools	X	X	X	X
Several competing discourses on the definition of inclusion	X	X	X	X
Increasing segregation between schools	X	X	X	X
Increasing issues with equity and equality in education	X	X	X	X
SENCOs having formal leaderships status	No	X	No	No