

## Article

# ‘Getting into the Nucleus of the School’: Experiences of Collaboration between Special Educational Needs Coordinators, Senior Leadership Teams and Educational Psychologists in Irish Post-Primary Schools

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**Abstract:** This research study explored barriers and facilitators to collaboration between National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologists, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), and Senior Leadership Teams (SLT) in Irish post-primary schools (students aged between 12 and 18 years). NEPS’ role in facilitating collaboration is uncertain, exacerbated by the absence of policy outlining the SENCO role and tensions between special and inclusive education. It is unclear what the experiences of collaboration between NEPS psychologists and post-primary schools might be within this nebulous policy context. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was used, framed by Dynamic Systems Theory. Participants were NEPS psychologists, SENCOs, and SLT. Phase 1 involved an online survey ( $n = 278$ ), which identified barriers and facilitators to collaboration and informed Phase 2. This paper presents Phase 2, comprising semi-structured interviews ( $n = 9$ ). Interviews were analysed using multi-perspectival interpretative phenomenological analysis, facilitating experiential exploration of collaboration between NEPS, SLT, and SENCOs. Participants described the experience of transitioning from working in silos to collaborative hubs. Systemic and interpersonal factors facilitated deliberate construction of evolving, dynamic, collaborative spaces between post-primary schools and NEPS. Policy gaps arise regarding consultation, collaboration, special education, and inclusion. This research begins to clarify the varied ways in which practice occurs in these gaps and indicates ways in which NEPS psychologists can collaborate with SENCOs and SLT to create active, effective hubs of knowledge to support students.

**Keywords:** inclusive and special education; post-primary; SENCO role; collaboration; educational psychologist



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## 1. Introduction

Educational provision for children with special educational needs (SEN) in Ireland has undergone considerable changes and remains in a state of flux, particularly with regard to its positionality in terms of special and/or inclusive education [1,2]. This research study focuses on Irish post-primary schools, which serve students aged 12–18 years. While special and inclusive education may appear disparate, contemporary discourse has begun to explicate the interdependencies and tensions between these fraught, mutually dependent concepts [3]. ‘Inclusive’ education is not explicitly defined in Irish policy [2]. This contributes to the complexity that this research attempts to explore. However, currently, inclusive education is recognised to occur across a range of provisions, including special schools [2]. Special education emerged, on the one hand, as a response to the historical exclusion of children with SEN from mainstream schools and, on the other hand, as an appropriate response to meeting the educational needs of some students; specialised teaching strategies were

developed in special settings, separated from the mainstream context [4,5]. Conversely, the wider inclusion agenda emerged as a human-rights-based response to societal exclusion of people with SEN and/or disabilities [4]. International policy drivers strongly espouse inclusive education: the UNCRPD positioned school and community inclusion as a human rights matter [6]. The UNCRPD emphasised the right of people with disabilities to access appropriate, inclusive education and stated that people with disabilities must not be excluded from mainstream education [6]. Thus, the UNCRPD positioned special education, particularly when it occurs in separate settings, including special schools and classes, as philosophically distinct from inclusive education and contrary to the human rights of people with disabilities [6]. This ideological purity is potentially problematic in practice as there is a risk that prioritising the location of children's learning over other factors enabling inclusion (curriculum, instructional approaches, etc.) will result in some children not having their individual learning needs met [7]. The interplay between special and inclusive education can be traced through legislation and policy; the aim of including all children in school and society is balanced with identifying and meeting individual needs.

Irish policy previously espoused special education, with separate SEN and mainstream provision [2]. Future directions of Irish educational policy are influenced by an inclusive agenda in international policy; the Irish government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018 [2]. Accordingly, the National Council for Special Education is considering all options, including a full inclusion model with all children attending mainstream schools [8]. The National Council for Special Education is an independent statutory body that organises allocation of additional supports to schools and is involved in research and policy advice [9]. Transitioning between special and inclusive education is highly complex; tensions arise around resourcing and the risk of overlooking some children's needs [8,10]. These tensions must be balanced with ambition for every child to participate in education and society [3,11].

Recently, Irish policy has attempted to implement a more cohesive blend of special and inclusive education. Introduced in 2017 as a response to NCSE policy advice entitled 'Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools' [12], the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model aims to address inequities evident in the previous resource allocation model by allocating additional supports to schools based on school-level profiles of needs rather than diagnosis [12,13]. The Special Education Teacher Allocation Model is mediated by the Continuum of Support, a multi-tiered system of support providing layered support for students' common, distinct, and unique needs [14]. Evidence-based practices are supposed to be used at each level, with more specialised instruction taking place at Levels 2 and 3 for students with more distinct and unique needs [14]. Hornby [11] refers to this more temperate approach as inclusive special education; the most useful elements of special and inclusive education are flexibly combined, centralising children's needs in decision-making.

Policy changes require post-primary schools to support all students' needs and necessitate effective linkages between post-primary schools and external agencies, such as NEPS. NEPS psychologists have adopted a consultative model of service, the aim of which is to empower primary and post-primary schools to support students around learning, behaviour, and social-emotional development [15]. NEPS psychologists provide whole-school support for all students as well as assessment and support for individual students; NEPS is also involved in special projects and research [15].

It is unclear whether the Continuum of Support is currently underpinned by inclusive special education because, in Irish policy, language around special and inclusive education is used interchangeably despite the disparate practices associated with each [14]. Furthermore, the extent to which the Continuum of Support can facilitate inclusive special education is largely bound up in the model of resource allocation, which determines how students move between levels, and the availability of therapeutic intervention. This shift towards a focus on children's needs rather than diagnosis and an emphasis on a whole-school approach in mainstream schools was arguably the most explicit indicator that Irish policy

was transitioning in the direction of inclusive education; a key aim of the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model was that every school would become inclusive [2]. The Special Education Teacher Allocation Model has yet to be evaluated; it is unclear whether the transition from special to inclusive language constituted a meaningful, deep-rooted change or whether it was a surface-level response to inclusion-focused trends in international discourse [2]. The Special Education Teacher Allocation Model changed the way in which the Continuum of Support was implemented, although the structure of the Continuum of Support itself remains unchanged [14]. This is exemplified by the shift in the role of NEPS from assessor and gatekeeper to facilitator of consultation; NEPS psychologists are expected to use problem-solving frameworks to enable schools to identify students with SEN across the Continuum of Support and to devise appropriate evidence-based interventions [12]. Indeed the need for an SENCO role arguably grew out of this change in policy; a whole-school approach requires an agent of systemic change [16,17]. This highlights another systemic gap in policy; the SENCO role, or an equivalent, is not explicitly mentioned in any national policy pertaining to post-primary schools. Consultation between NEPS and post-primary schools across the Continuum of Support focuses on systemic, whole-school work at Level 1 (support for all) and on groups or individuals with more complex needs at Levels 2 (support for some) and 3 (support for a few) [14]. From schools' perspectives, Level 1 support includes whole-class or whole-school interventions focusing on topics such as wellbeing or literacy, Level 2 support might involve in-class or withdrawal support for groups of students with common needs, and Level 3 involves individualised, tailored support for students with more complex needs [14]. Consultation is intended to facilitate collaboration whereby multiple disciplines work together to co-create solutions and all stakeholders' views are equally valued [18]. Consultation could also occur in the absence of collaboration depending on interpersonal and systemic factors [19]. Collaboration is facilitated by positive interpersonal relationships involving trust, a feeling of equality, and an entry process to create shared understandings [20].

It is difficult to clarify whether consultation between SENCOs, Senior Leadership Teams (SLT), and NEPS is collaborative in nature and how post-primary schools and NEPS are linked across the Continuum of Support due to the absence of the SENCO role from policy [1,17]. In Ireland, the SENCO is usually a teacher tasked with co-ordinating provision for students with SEN; tasks may include arranging whole-class screening and individual assessments, applying for additional support and resources, and co-ordinating the SEN team [1]. This contrasts with international contexts; in England, the SENCO role is underpinned by the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice and the National Award for SEN Co-ordination [21–23]. SENCO status within Irish post-primary school structures and the degree of congruence between SENCOs and SLT are unclear, although, in practice, SENCOs operate in many Irish post-primary schools and sometimes complete SENCO duties as part of a formal middle leadership Assistant Principal (AP) I or II post [17,24]. The relationship between SENCOs, SLT, and NEPS manifests in the everyday work of NEPS and post-primary schools and is central to the debate around inclusive and special education. Studies in England and Denmark found that, as policy shifted from special to inclusive education, the focus of consultation between educational psychologists (EPs) and schools shifted away from a deficit-oriented focus on within-child factors towards an ecological perspective considering interacting biopsychosocial factors influencing children's development [25]. When these three groups work together within the framework of the Continuum of Support, they represent the intersection between special and inclusive education and consultation and collaboration.

### *Rationale*

This research aimed to explore the experiences of collaboration between NEPS and post-primary SLTs and SENCOs and identify the barriers and facilitators of collaboration across the Continuum of Support. No Irish study had previously explored the experiences of all three groups. Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) facilitated examination of the theoretic-

cal and systemic tangles [26]. DST posits that systems are constantly in flux and recursively influenced by interactions within and between systems [26]. This reflects the concept of inclusive schools being dynamic and on-the-move [27]. Because DST examines interpersonal and systemic linkages, it facilitated exploration of the interacting systemic and interpersonal factors that shaped collaboration between NEPS and post-primary schools. While surface-level structures, such as policy documents, may change quickly, deeper structures, such as attitudes and ingrained practices, change more slowly [28].

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Design

This paper presents Phase 2 of a mixed-methods sequential explanatory study [29]. Phase 1 involved a cross-sectional survey ( $n = 278$ ) to inform themes for Phase 2 semi-structured interviews. Key themes included systems for communication, interpersonal relationships, understanding of the post-primary context, and practical considerations, including time and administrative demands. In Phase 2, semi-structured interviews with SENCOs ( $n = 3$ ), SLT ( $n = 3$ ) and NEPS ( $n = 3$ ) were framed by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The idiographic and hermeneutic nature of IPA facilitated granular exploration of participants' experiences; the researchers aimed to make sense of the way in which participants understood their experiences [30]. A multi-perspectival directly related group design was used; SENCOs, SLT, and NEPS constitute subgroups with different perspectives on a common experience [31].

### 2.2. Quality

In IPA research, validity is defined in terms of adherence to rigorous quality standards from the initial design through to data analysis [30]. The research adhered to the four pillars of quality: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency, and impact and importance [30,32]. The research process involved continuously documenting reflections on these markers for quality. The research adhered to quality markers for IPA research [30,32]. The written narrative account centralised participants' voices and acknowledged diverse practice contexts, facilitating transferability [30]. Commitment and rigour were achieved by developing an IPA-compatible interview schedule and following a rigorous analysis process [30]. Coherence and transparency were enhanced by highlighting a clear narrative from literature review through methodological and analytical decisions to the discussion; DST provided an overarching framework [32]. Impact and importance were addressed by outlining practical implications [32]. Making the research paradigm explicit ensured confirmability; dependability was achieved by documenting research procedures, and member checking enhanced credibility [33].

### 2.3. Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to identify 3 participants from each group to take part in interviews [34]. Potential participants were contacted by email. When recruiting SENCOs, SLT, and NEPS psychologists, variation was sought in terms of school type, size and patronage, socio-economic status, and geographic location. Participants with a variety of experiences and working in a variety of locations were sought. SENCOs and SLT members from different schools were interviewed in order to avoid compromising relationships within schools, for example, where criticism or sensitive issues, such as stress, may arise. NEPS psychologists who worked with SLT/SENCOs interviewed were not recruited. This avoided negative implications for the relationship between NEPS and post-primary schools in the event that sensitive issues or criticism emerge during the interview. Due to the experiential nature of interpretative phenomenological analysis, it should be noted that individual participants' experiences are not necessarily representative of formal NEPS or Department of Education policies.

#### 2.4. Participants

Participants included NEPS psychologists, SLT, and SENCOs (Table 1). SLT and SENCOs were working in post-primary schools with experience of working with NEPS. NEPS psychologists were qualified educational psychologists employed by NEPS with post-primary schools on their caseloads. Purposive sampling was used to identify three participants from each group [34].

**Table 1.** Participant pen pictures.

Saoirse is an SENCO in a mixed rural DEIS school serving a large town and surrounding rural area (the Delivering Equality in Schools (DEIS) scheme provides additional resources and funding to schools that serve disadvantaged communities. ‘ <i>Deis</i> ’ means ‘opportunity’ in the Irish language). Almost half of the school’s 300 students are on the SEN register, with one-third experiencing complex needs. The school has an ASD class. The SENCO role is part of an Assistant Principal I post that includes other leadership duties. Saoirse holds an Assistant Principal II post but is currently acting as an Assistant Principal I. She has completed the postgraduate diploma in SEN. Saoirse has four hours per week assigned to Assistant Principal I duties, with two hours assigned to the SENCO role.
Síle works in an all-girls private fee-paying school with approximately 365 students, with around 20 on the SEN register. The school does not currently have an SEN team. Síle has completed a postgraduate diploma in SEN. Síle holds an Assistant Principal I post, which does not include SENCO duties.
Sinéad works in a DEIS school in a city, with a linguistically and culturally diverse student population. All students are on the Additional Educational Needs (AEN) register, with records kept of students receiving support across the Continuum of Support. Sinéad has completed a Postgraduate Diploma in SEN and holds an Assistant Principal II position. Sinéad and the AEN team have flexibility within their timetables to complete their duties.
Peadar has a post-graduate qualification in educational leadership and is the principal of a mixed DEIS school. He joined the school four years ago as principal, when enrolment was in decline; numbers have since increased. The school serves a large town and surrounding rural area. Of the 320 students in the school, 30% are on the SEN register and there are two classes for students with ASD. There is a SENCO in the school.
Paula is the deputy principal of a rural DEIS school with 380 students. The SENCO role is distributed across one AP I post and two AP II posts. Approximately 30% of students have psychological reports, and there is an ASD class in the school.
Patricia is the principal of a mixed school in a large town with 800 students. She completed a postgraduate diploma in SEN and has worked in the school for almost 40 years, becoming principal in 2014. There is an SEN team and a SENCO who is an AP II post-holder. The school has two ASD classes and includes students with a variety of complex needs.
Neasa completed a psychology degree and post-graduate qualification in primary teaching. She taught in primary school junior classes. She qualified as an Educational Psychologist via a master’s degree. Neasa previously worked with an all-girls city school with a reputation for academic achievement, and with a mixed Educate Together city school. She currently works with a large mixed DEIS school.
Nóra trained as a primary school teacher and taught in a special school for children with mild General Learning Disabilities. She completed a psychology degree and qualified as an Educational Psychologist via a doctoral programme in the UK. She worked in England before returning to NEPS. There was an emphasis on consultation in her training and when she joined NEPS. Nóra has worked with her current two post-primary schools for the past 9–10 years (both mixed post-primary schools with 300–350 pupils, one rural and one near a city).
Nuala worked as a primary school teacher in the UK before qualifying as an Educational Psychologist via a doctoral programme. She worked as a senior Educational Psychologist in England with children and families from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and with a mix of large/small, rural/urban post-primary schools; most were academy schools. Nuala returned to Ireland some years ago and has been working with NEPS since then; she has worked with one private post-primary school and two large rural post-primary schools.



### 2.5. Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee]. Participants received information sheets and consent forms at least one week before interviews. To avoid compromising relationships where criticism or sensitive issues may arise, care was taken to ensure that participants were not working together. Second-order member checking ensured that selected quotes were acceptable to participants from a confidentiality perspective [35,36]. Participants could amend or withdraw any or all their data during the member-checking process.

### 2.6. Limitations

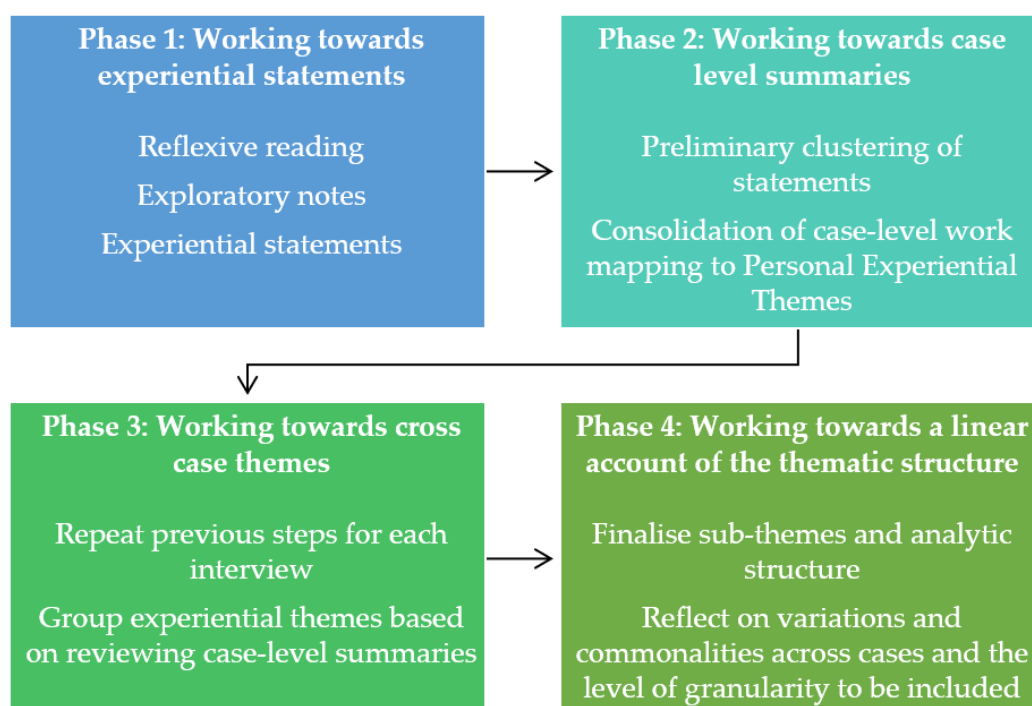
The researchers acknowledge limitations to the research. The small-scale experiential nature of the study means that conclusions are transferable rather than generalisable [30,33]. Further, it was beyond the scope of this research to explore experiences of parents and young people.

### 2.7. Data Collection

The data collection processes reflected the principles of commitment and rigour [32]. Data were collected and analysed by the principal investigator (M.H.). Semi-structured interviews were piloted with one member of each group: participants completed the interview via Microsoft Teams and provided feedback verbally. These data were not included in the final analysis. Interviews were then recorded using Microsoft Teams, which facilitated repeated watching during transcription; the researchers could reflect on interviewing technique and demeanour and observe non-verbal features of participants' responses.

### 2.8. Data Analysis

Results were analysed using a Dynamic Systems Theory lens [37,38]. IPA was used to explore individual experiences and patterns across the dataset [30]; see Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Analysis process for semi-structured interviews.

Phase 1 of data analysis involved working towards experiential statements [30]. This involved creating transcriptions by (re)watching the video recordings of the interviews

via Microsoft Teams and reflexive (re)reading of the raw transcripts. Exploratory notes were added to the transcripts, using colour coding to differentiate between descriptive notes summarising key points, linguistic notes on use of language and features such as metaphor, and conceptual notes on underlying constructs and making links to theory or policy. Phase 1 concluded with creation of experiential statements to explain the meanings of initial themes [30]. The aim was to articulate the main claims being made about the meaning of a participant's experience based on their account.

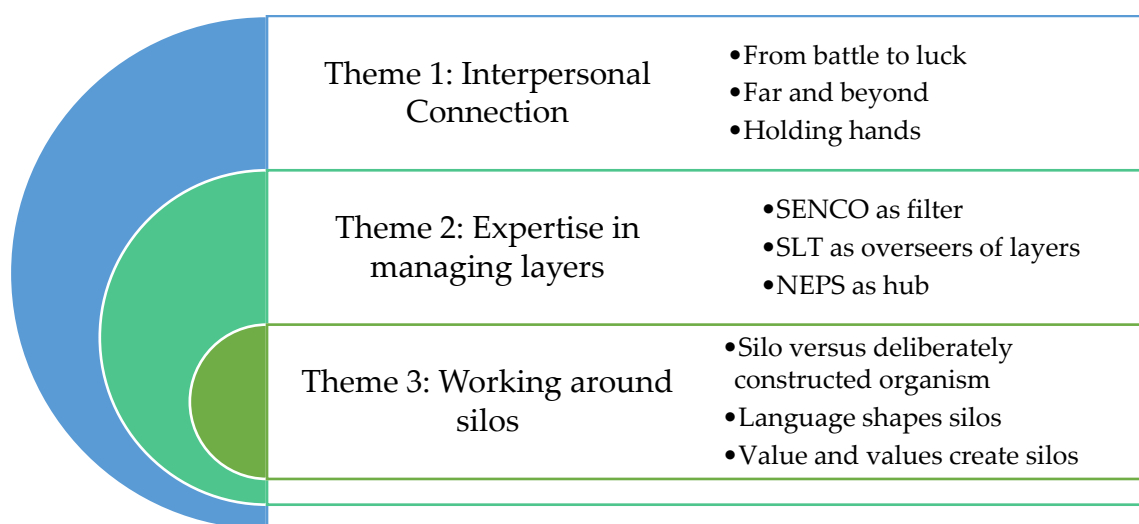
Phase 2 involved working towards case-level summaries, namely Personal Experiential Themes [30]. Preliminary clustering of statements was conducted, with supplementary annotation and reflections [30]. Colour coding and timestamps were used to link Personal Experiential Themes with raw transcripts.

Phase 3 involved working towards cross-case themes [30]. The steps described above for Phases 1 and 2 were repeated for each participant, with further reflections, interpretations, and notes being added in an iterative manner [30]. Group experiential themes for each group (SENCOs, SLT, and NEPS) were formed by reviewing case-level summaries and identifying potential themes that cut across the cases [30]. The three sets of group experiential themes were synthesised into overarching themes to address the multi-perspectival nature of the analysis [30,31].

A linear account of the thematic structure was developed in Phase 4 [30]. This research study uses a case-in-theme structure whereby the themes provide structure for the write-up, with quotes from participants used to illustrate the themes. Phase 4 also involved reflection on convergences and divergences between participants' accounts and on the overall data analysis process [30].

### 3. Results

Three group experiential themes were identified arising from participants' experiences of barriers and facilitators to collaboration between NEPS, SENCOs, and SLT, with tensions around inclusive and/or special education as a contextual backdrop (Figure 2). Details omitted to protect confidentiality are marked [ ... ].



**Figure 2.** Group experiential themes.

#### 3.1. Theme 1: Interpersonal Connections

##### 3.1.1. From Battle to Luck

Many participants, particularly SENCOs, felt lucky if conditions for positive interpersonal relationships were present. Saoirse used the word 'lucky' ten times altogether, including feeling lucky to have a formal leadership post (an AP I position) with time allocated to SENCO duties, although 'it's not enough.' This emphasis on luck, including feeling

lucky to have insufficient time, indicates the precarious and chancy nature of undertaking a role that is not explicitly outlined in policy.

Saoirse, Síle, and Paula all felt 'lucky' in their relationship with their NEPS psychologists, as did Patricia:

*It wasn't for the good of the child, d'you know. It wasn't. With [current psychologist] it always is. So I'm very lucky and I hope that we still have her, I got a letter the other day to say she's appointed to us for next year again. Thank God. I'm very lucky.*

This indicates that Patricia values a student-centred relationship between the school and NEPS. The repetition of 'lucky' suggests that there is a sense that effective NEPS support is not guaranteed.

Síle, Patricia, and Neasa described interpersonal challenges leading to battles or uncertainty. Síle felt that having an SEN team could resolve the 'big battle' in her school; hers was the only school without an SEN team:

*I'd like a team, because then you could, you know, have an expert in maybe all of those areas or a few of us could have a few of the skills that we could share. So quite often I feel it's the tail wagging the dog. You know, rather than the other way around. But look, we'll fight the good fight and we'll keep asking for it. I might get it from private prayer.*

The image of the tail wagging the dog suggests that the SEN agenda is not currently being led by relevant expertise but by other agendas; an SEN team would facilitate development and dissemination of expertise across the school. An interpersonal battle, and possibly divine intervention, are needed to create the relationships and systems necessary to distribute specialised expertise across the school. Neasa said that interpersonal mismatches can also lead to uncertainty due to 'confidence' issues and an absence of reciprocity from the relationship with SLT: 'it's easier when they come to you.'

All three SLT members spoke about their role in managing interpersonal relationships to minimise conflict. While the particulars of these conflict situations cannot be described due to confidentiality, a common thread was that conflicts were resolved by SLT members ensuring that dynamic, collaboration-minded staff were appointed to key positions and using whole-school values rather than personal agendas to drive change. For example, Patricia resolved a battle situation in the SEN team by assuming certain characteristics to engage in the complex process of managing personalities: 'I'm not a ruthless person, but I have to be because otherwise I'd be left with a whole lot of dodos. So, dodos are extinct.' Patricia values staff members who, unlike the dodo, can evolve and change and whose individual work and collaboration with one another are effective and functional; an inclusive school is on-the-move [27]. Patricia is driving this evolution; she employed specific behaviours and used her formal leadership post to transform a 'battle' into a calm environment and now feels 'lucky' to have an 'excellent' SENCO with whom collaboration is smooth and effective. Luck is intentionally created, but this does not minimise the barriers posed by interpersonal challenges, particularly around the SENCO role.

### 3.1.2. Far and Beyond

Many participants expressed the view that meaningful collaboration between SENCOs, SLT, and NEPS required all involved to go above and beyond designated role expectations to achieve support for students through collaboration. This was prominent in Patricia's interview:

*When we closed in January [due to COVID], we asked them [Special Needs Assistants and Special Education Teachers] to phone on a regular basis all of their students because they weren't the type that were going to engage too much with school anyway. Some of them went far and beyond what they were called to do.*

'Far and beyond' encapsulates the experience of transcending role requirements through personal commitment; there is a sense of moving past barriers to support students. Similarly, Nuala said that SLT's personal interest in SEN is a crucial prerequisite to collabo-



ration, but ‘not everyone’s like that. You know it’s it’s where you see yourself in terms of your ambitions. And it’s gonna feed into it somehow.’ The idea of surpassing role requirements is particularly interesting regarding SENCOs, who have to transcend a nebulous role that is absent from policy. A personal toll was common; each SENCO discussed the personal consequences of working beyond role requirements. Síle’s experience is typical; she described feeling ‘burnt out’ due to ‘relentless’ work:

*I have to say I’m tired. [ . . . ] I”s like a piece of elastic really, and I don’t seem to have the personality to say, well I can’t do that because if it’s not done I’m looking at a child’s face and I can’t sleep at night then. I mean, I can’t, you know. So by our nature I suppose in the role we’re not as kind of I suppose strict or as disciplined as we could be if you like.*

This positions the SENCO role as requiring elasticity; Síle is flexible and accommodating when meeting children’s needs. Elastic breaks if stretched too far; this reflects Síle’s experience of tiredness. Síle feels that she does not have a choice about working far beyond role requirements: her underpinning motivation is meeting the children’s needs. Síle uses ‘we’ and ‘our’, giving the impression that Síle believes that this is a shared experience among SENCOs. Patricia attributed this personal toll to the absence of the SENCO role in policy:

*It’s not mentioned, It’s not catered for, it can be an AP [assistant principal] II post, it can be an AP I post. It can have hours, it can have no hours and no money. It can be anything. It can be enough for teachers to resign from it.*

This captures the variability of the SENCO role and the personal burden carried by SENCOs. Many participants described factors that shaped their ability to work beyond role requirements. Patricia described the development of the SEN department as her ‘baby,’ requiring collective, transcendent commitment from staff who are ‘willing to put the same amount of time and effort and commitments into it that I am.’ SEN provision, like a baby, needs careful nurturing, reflecting the idea of leadership for inclusion; there is an individual element relating to Patricia’s values, and an interpersonal element around recruiting equally committed staff. NEPS participants also felt that collective commitment is necessary to transcend role requirements; Neasa said that ‘as one person walking in, it’s really hard to change the system.’ Patricia and Síle used the image of box-ticking to illustrate the opposite of someone who goes ‘far and beyond,’ as Patricia described:

*You can’t have box-tickers. You have to have people who look beyond the 40-min class or the one-hour class and see the big picture. And it’s becoming more complicated.*

Box-ticking involves a narrow view of children; conversely, the SEN department’s role transcends school because students’ needs extend beyond the classroom. Patricia said that staff members might become box-tickers if their reasons for actions or non-actions arose from adhering to union edicts. Síle felt that box-ticking arose from many functions being transferred from NEPS or other agencies to schools by policies, such as the Irish exemption policy. Exemptions from the study of the Irish language may be provided to students experiencing persistent literacy difficulties and whose literacy scores fall below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile on standardised tests of literacy attainment; the exemption process is now administered by schools rather than NEPS [39]. These policy decisions are requiring her to continue working beyond her role requirements, which, as SENCO, are not formally recognised in policy. Going ‘far and beyond’ implies action; looking beyond constraining factors, such as a time-bound class, implies that practice must be reflective, and the ‘big picture’ is changing and becoming more complicated as one reflects on it. This aligns with DST [37]; time is a dynamic factor that interacts with the systems of individual children, classes, staff, and overall school structures.

Many participants described factors that enhanced their ability to ‘go far and beyond’. Patricia said that the ‘motivation and care’ shown by NEPS psychologists was an important factor. Sinéad said that, as a ‘disgruntled AP II post-holder,’ the financial rewards for her personal commitment are miniscule: ‘It’s the coffee I drink to keep the job going. It’s gone in coffee.’ This creates a simultaneous image of negligible financial gains and the

challenges of an exhausting, demanding job. It also highlights the dissonance between the practical demands of the SENCO role and AP structures. Sinéad defines the rewards of her role as achieving effective support for all students and incrementally developing a shared understanding with the principal:

*Instead of getting a bunch of carrots, or all the carrots, I may have got half the carrots, but I'm very happy to take half the carrots and the next time I'd like to— because now he's getting, he's really starting to get it as well, am, and then the next time, then I'll get a little bit more and we'll build it.*

Sinéad is reaping the rewards that her work has sown; notably, there is no stick accompanying the carrot, suggesting that the dynamic between SLT and SENCO and perhaps the wider staff is based on positive interpersonal relationships. There is a sense of collective progress towards collaboratively building SEN support; Sinéad is thinking ahead to 'next time.'

### 3.1.3. Holding Hands

While participants' experiences of interpersonal relationships varied considerably, many felt that SENCOs, SLT, and NEPS have a role in holding each other within relationships and in holding families' hands while supporting students' needs. Nuala applied her reflections on working with SENCOs in England to the potential SENCO role in Ireland:

*The SENCO is the person that mediates it for the family and explains it and helps them and supports them and is that little light in the tunnel that helps them see the other side when people are giving them names and labels and talking about their child in very deficit-oriented language, because that's just the nature of the job. The SENCO is the person that holds their hands kind of through the process and helps them see the journey and the path forward and helps them see you know, this is how we're gonna help you, help your child achieve their potential. And they sound like real catch words and buzz words, but they actually really mean something when you, when you're in the middle of this and you want someone to say, but what can we do to help? They're the person that helps you with the help. That's quite an inspiring role, isn't it? I don't know how you capture that in a job description.*

Nuala describes her vision of a transformative SENCO role, juxtaposed with her statement that she cannot capture this in a tightly defined and standardised job description. The SENCO is positioned as a guiding light providing comfort and security against potentially threatening labels and language. The definition-resistant, transcendent nature of the SENCO role is captured in the idea that SENCOs help families with the help provided by schools; the SENCO role is intrinsic to the work of the school and is potentially transformative for families and other professionals, including NEPS. Most participants also described the NEPS role in trustful, collaborative relationships, 'providing a safe space for teachers who are very stressed' (Nóra). Sinéad and Síle described the relationship with NEPS as essential to their work and school-wide SEN provision; this relationship is 'one of the saviours of our system' because 'we'd be lost without her' (Saoirse). There is a sense that the NEPS psychologist provides security and direction for the school system. Together with Nuala's experiences, this creates a symbiotic image of NEPS and SENCOs holding one another in trustful, transformative relationships.

Nóra's description of maintaining relationships with schools and parents illuminates this image of co-collaborators holding each other safely: 'it is a tightrope that you have to walk there sometimes.' This image of non-optional tightrope-walking positions collaboration as a tense, risky process; imbalances could be dangerous. Qualities inherent within trustful relationships included honesty (Sinéad), respect (Paula), and open communication to avoid being 'on your own' (Saoirse). Participants' accounts indicated that these qualities needed to be present in the individuals engaging in collaboration, and also needed to be intentionally co-constructed so that the tightrope walk of collaboration could be achieved

safely and productively. All participants said that training for SLT and SENCOs and explicit role recognition for SENCOs was an important solution.

### 3.2. Theme 2: Expertise in Managing Layers

#### 3.2.1. SENCO as Filter

Participants described the expertise and skills required by SENCOs. Nuala captured this intersection between the systemic, expert, and leadership aspects of the SENCO role:

*You want them to be at the table where the decisions are made and you want that voice to be heard and you want somebody with a really good knowledge of, just of special needs and where it's going and to be able to filter that policy throughout the school.*

This view of the SENCO as a filter involves an intersection between specialist and whole-school work. SEN expertise is seen as a dynamic system that is evolving and 'going' in specific directions. The SENCO role was formalised in most participants' schools, unlike national policy. Duties included co-ordinating SNAs, screening for incoming first years, liaising with SLT, SET timetabling, applications for reasonable accommodations in certificate examinations (RACE) and assistive technology, meeting parents and teachers, and working with SEN and student support teams. Each SENCO also taught some mainstream classes. Sinéad mentioned providing guidance to teachers around topics such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Each SENCO described the information management system used in their school to gather and share information among staff; these systems represented translation of the Continuum of Support into everyday practice. Sinéad said that 'my AEN [Additional Educational Needs] register is for every student,' illustrating the whole-school, systemic nature of her role across the Continuum of Support. SENCOs liaised with external agencies, including private therapists, NEPS, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and disability services.

Sinéad's experience of filtering is purposeful; she is trying to achieve change through her role 'bit by bit' and incrementally: 'every year it will grow.' Her role was changed following introduction of the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model in 2017:

*I feel it more now. You know that kind of draw, where I've realised the job is so administrative and operational that that link to kind of the student isn't as strong as it would have been previous to the new model, but then you do have more—because you have to have more stronger links to the teachers and the SNAs and parents. You know, but the actively like going in and doing, you know, you know, supporting students with dyslexia or supporting students with behavioural—or you know that support which would have been the traditional role of the SENCO. That has kind of become more for the team.*

Administration is positioned on a pole opposite connections with students; Sinéad is pulled between systemic work and specialist expertise. Time is an active and dynamic element of the filtering relationship between the SENCO and layers in the school, such as students, teachers, SNAs, and parents, illustrated by Sinéad's use of temporal markers. While Sinéad now has stronger links with teachers, SNAs, and parents, her role is less actively involved with students, and the traditional SENCO role is now distributed among the team, which is a new layer created following the introduction of the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model. Policy–practice tensions are, therefore, actively experienced. Neasa described the confusion that can occur among policy–practice tensions around the SENCO role:

*Is part of their role to link with NEPS and has that been made explicitly a part of their role that they'll kind of take that on? I'm not sure you know, or is it just that they need an assessment and ring that person you know, who can do the assessment for you?*

Neasa's two questions present contrasting visions of the SENCO role: the first conceptualises liaison with NEPS as an explicit part of the role, reflecting the image of the SENCO as a filter, while the second presents a narrow, assessment-focused view of NEPS.

Nóra describes a different experience of the actual and potential SENCO role, which is unsurprising given variability in practice among schools.

*It's a really important role 'cause they do oversee not just, you know, I think it's not just about overseeing the needs for some and for a few. It's also about good preventative approaches and supporting staff with the implementation of those preventative approaches and liaising, you know, looking up to us, and to the NCSE [National Council for Special Education] or whatever for you know information like that so and and time should be given to that role.*

Preventative approaches align with Level 1 of the Continuum of Support, reinforcing the image of the SENCO as a filter across layers. There is a contrast in Nóra's description of the relationship between SENCOs and NEPS: 'looking up' to external agencies such as NEPS could indicate an expertise hierarchy, while 'liaising' implies collaborating and exchanging information on an equal footing. This contrast could reflect the complexity of having different types of expertise without setting one above the other. Both Saoirse and Sinéad said that training and role recognition could ensure that SENCOs have the requisite skills to engage in both interpersonal and systemic work.

### 3.2.2. SLT Oversight of Layers

While SENCOs act as filters across systemic layers, a sense of layered accountability was experienced by all three SLT members, described by Peadar:

*In a sterile world of governance in schools I'm the accountable officer to all that exists in the school. But I suppose first and foremost I'm primarily motivated that all children em irrespective of background need, when you come into this school, achieve the potential. So there's a, there's a deeper ideological viewpoint there, you know. So every child's achieving their potential, wherever that potential is at, then we use, start to use the infrastructure and instruments of the school to try and meet those needs. And, it's my view that I identify, see where the potential shortcomings are, whether that be within the infrastructure of the school, or the channels of communication or recording spaces, and then having the suitable candidates, personnel in terms of the right roles and responsibilities.*

Peadar's oversight ensures that school infrastructure is intentionally constructed, including channels and spaces for communication. Accountability requirements contrast with deeper ideology, highlighting layers within the school. The governance layer is at a shallower level; the deeper ideological viewpoint underpins Peadar's primary motivation and is a meaningful driver in the school. Similarly, Paula oversees the implementation of the Continuum of Support, which involves 'layers of learning support for all'. There is a sense that external policy obligations are taken seriously, but the school's foundations exist because of intrinsic motivations and values set by Peadar.

Each SLT member described challenges in achieving effective oversight. Peadar and Patricia described a process of transformation in their schools, which Peadar said was 'damn hard work' and necessitated 'recalibrating the whole value system of the school, and where we need to be going'. This suggests that meaningful change requires transforming the school system from its core in an ongoing rather than once-off manner. Peadar was aware of both official and unofficial layers as part of his oversight of the school, including avoiding populism or alignment with a 'particular group'; Paula and Patricia reported similar experiences. For Patricia, formalisation of middle management structures in Circular 03/2018 enabled her to 'bypass all of the other rubbish' and appoint an appropriate staff member to the SENCO role, which had previously been challenging due to legacy issues, thereby reducing conflict.

### 3.2.3. NEPS as Hub

Many participants spoke about NEPS supporting management and the systems level of the school across the Continuum of Support. Nóra described creating linkages with stakeholders:

*Our role is often just providing a space, a respectful space where people can slow down and reflect and think about, you know, rather than just running around all the time in a stressed state. Because often you know a lot of our work involves, you know, kids in some form of stress, and teachers stressed as well.*

Regarding the contrast between unhurried and reflective ‘space’ and being rushed and tense positions collaboration as a deliberate, agentic process, Nóra creates a hub for stakeholders to meet with and engage with one another. Participants’ experiences indicate that the introduction of the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model was a key turning point, as described by Neasa:

*NEPS started out doing a lot of assessments, you know that kind of a way. And we started out as being gatekeepers and the resource hours and things. So, so trying to change any kind of a system like that is going to be really hard and take a really long time.*

This adds to the sense of space discussed above and to the sense of roles shifting over time. Similarly, Sinéad described a ‘little state of flux’ following the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model; this transition has been experienced differently across participants’ schools, although the introduction of the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model was a common thread. Neasa described a situation whereby an increase in mental health concerns among students during COVID-19 school closures prompted closer engagement between Neasa and SLT, leading to creation of space for easier engagement:

*It’s [wellbeing] given us a way in, it’s given us something else to talk about rather than resources and we’re seen in a kind of a different light now.*

Wellbeing is positioned as a doorway by which Neasa and SLT entered a shared space; while Nóra described an aspect of the NEPS role as being a creator of space, Neasa observed that Educational Psychologists must have access to a shared space to be able to create and hold space for other stakeholders.

Peadar described the role of the ‘brilliant’ NEPS psychologist in supporting systemic change at Level 1; the school closed a number of times during the school year to run a series of workshops comprising targeted CPD for the staff, including adolescent neurological development, trauma, secondary behaviours, and the Continuum of Support.

*And that’s getting into the nucleus of, the nerve centre of the school and saying okay, how do we get in here and sort of shape and influence at a systems level the decision making, the influence of the school community. As opposed to starting, coming in at a case level, just on the ground to respond.*

This reflects DST, which originally developed within the field of biology to examine complex relationships from the cellular level to the inter-organism level [37]. This positions the school as a complex, multi-layered living organism: systemic interdependence within the school and between the school and NEPS is essential. This positions NEPS as a hub, creating and supporting connections at a deep, nucleus-like level within the school, and between schools and other agencies and resources. As with the manifold intra- and inter-cellular systems in an organism, systemic interdependence within the school and between the school and NEPS is essential.

### 3.3. Theme 3: Working around Silos

#### 3.3.1. Silo versus Deliberately Constructed Organism

Experiences of cohesive co-working varied considerably. Nuala and Neasa said that, in some post-primary schools, the NEPS role is placed in a silo along with the person undertaking the SENCO role, as described by Nuala:

*The absence maybe of an SEN role and an SEN coordinator’s role—you can, you can really see how how how you’re very siloed into that SEN department. You’re a department, you’re one little, tiny piece of the secondary school.*



The verb ‘siloed’ indicates an active rather than static separation between SEN and mainstream, with a power differential indicated by ‘little, tiny’. Nuala said that being siloed means that ‘the right arm doesn’t know what the left arm is doing’. Arguably, two arms belonging to the same body, or systems within a school, should be co-ordinated. Different, potentially contradictory, things are happening in each silo, unknown to each other. Paula provided an alternative experience: her school is ‘seen as the provider of SEN in our area,’ which is ‘unfair’. Paula’s experiences indicate that a whole school can be siloed; Patricia described a similar experience. As with Neasa and Nuala, there is a sense of an unwanted narrative being imposed by others (perhaps parents and other schools). Neasa’s description of being ‘funnelled into that special needs space kind of straight away’ implies difficulty in reaching beyond the higher tiers of the Continuum of Support; Neasa does not wish to be restricted to a narrow, ‘diluted’ role. This reflects Síle’s experience; she undertakes the SENCO role as an individual rather than as part of an SEN team: ‘everything then is landed on my desk’. The experience of being siloed by others is common to Paula, Síle, Neasa, and Nuala, whereby SEN and mainstream provision are in separate silos with little cohesion between them.

Peadar’s experience illuminates the way in which he is leading his school’s transition from working in silos to a more cohesive approach, together with the school’s NEPS psychologist:

*Schools are organic sort of organisations, they ebb and flow and where, where there’s human life we have to be flexible to meet these different needs and so, but then we need systems to operate in that space because if we don’t then things can fall pretty easily and the most vulnerable, in particular children with SEN, lose out in that space. So quite right, we need to have appropriate infrastructure and systems operating in and through that process. But equally we need the right personnel in and around that process. But fundamentally we need to have all of this built on proper foundations, and that speaks to having core values and having a very clear sense of purpose of vision of what we want to achieve in participating in this space.*

There is a juxtaposition between architectural images of structures, space, and infrastructure and flexible images of living organisms. Peadar evokes ocean imagery: while the ocean is powerful, it ripples and rolls rather than being fixed or rigid and supports living creatures. This suggests that the school’s strength arises from flexibility and that schools are living structures that exist to support students’ development. This complex balancing of built infrastructure and living, evolving processes reflects DST and is encapsulated by Peadar’s description of the process of creating space for students with SEN; saying that appropriate systems must be operating ‘in’ that process implies that suitable infrastructure and systems must be present, and ‘through that process’ suggests that infrastructure and systems are active in seeing the process through. Furthermore, staff work both ‘in and around’ the process of supporting students with SEN: this is a whole-school process rather than an add-on or a separate silo. This means that collaboration between staff and between the school and agencies such as NEPS is essential to the life of the school as a living organism. The process of constructing a living organism was intentional and effortful; when Peadar joined the school as principal, there were challenges around communication, supporting students’ needs, and retaining students. Paula and Patricia also described periods of transition. Peadar described the role of NEPS in supporting this evolution:

*We have to feed all of that by reliable and sound information. So we rely on outside agencies like our NEPS psychologist, like the NCSE [National Council for Special Education], Junior Cycle, PDST [Professional Development Service for Teachers], all these to come in and speak to us, so it’s just not just Peadar off on a rant here, but that it’s, this is, guys, where we need to go as a school.*

The NEPS role involves helping to nourish the whole system and is no longer siloed at the top of the Continuum of Support. There is a sense that Peadar is trying to avoid personal agendas: although he is leading the value-setting agenda, it is based on the best

available information. Overall, participants value and strive to create close links between SENCOs, NEPS, and SLT across all levels of the Continuum of Support.

### 3.3.2. Language Shapes Silos

Many participants described links between their experiences and the language that is used in everyday practice and policy. In some cases, differences in language indicated differing practices, while, in others, similar practices were described using different language. Both Paula and Sinéad emphasised strongly that the ‘support for all’ layer of the Continuum of Support underpinned their practice, although Paula’s school used SEN terminology while Sinéad’s school used Additional Educational Needs. Paula distinguished between language and action:

*People like to talk about nurture groups and all that sort of stuff and they like to talk about restorative practice. Really what you’re doing is you’re just doing the right thing for those children, and so we would have gone after that actively.*

There is a contrast here between ‘talk’ and actively ‘doing’; practical actions are presented as more useful than discourse in supporting students. In contrast, Sinéad sees language as part of action:

*A few of us have done the post grad in SEN and would have all come to the conclusion that we were uneasy with the term [special]. I think also within the—so we’ve been using additional, maybe for last three years, and actually probably since maybe 2017 is when we eliminated the term special altogether, and that came in in line with the new model, the circular there, we decided that was going to be our our linguistic change.*

This decision represents an intersection between emotions, research, and policy; from a DST perspective, discourse and action could be seen as dynamic systems feeding into the overall school system [37]. For Sinéad and Patricia, the language of additional needs used in the school, including school policies, is intertwined in inclusive practice. Despite differences in language, it is notable that the school systems described by both Paula and Sinéad reflect an inclusive special education approach [11]. Both schools have programmes and systems based on identified needs across the Continuum of Support, suggesting that there is not a single correct form of language associated with effective support for students’ needs.

For Síle and Neasa, changes in discourse and language are linked with changes in practice, as described by Neasa:

*Our conversations were always so narrow, like that they had a very strong agenda about getting an assessment or whatever, so that’s, it seemed to be from the get-go, that’s what they wanted to use their NEPS time for, and there was kind of very little negotiation.*

Narrow, assessment-focused conversations contrast with ‘open discussion’ around the potential NEPS role, including whole-school work. The absence of negotiation indicates that the relationship was not reciprocal but transactional and resource-focused. Síle said that her ‘new job this year’ was to simultaneously change the school’s language and practice:

*Resource is the word we had been using, but we’re now trying to do better because we know better and we’re trying to call it learning support. I’m doing my best, but it’ll take a while for that to establish.*

Repetition of ‘trying’ indicates that change is difficult: Síle is striving to enact improvements in her school, and changing language is an element of this move towards ‘inclusivity’. Síle is working in a silo whereby she is almost solely responsible for SEN provision. In changing language, which is a surface-level feature, Síle is attempting to drive deeper structural change to create a more open space for supporting students’ needs.

### 3.3.3. The Value of Collaboration

Sinéad, Neasa, and Nuala spoke about the value placed on NEPS’ time. Sinéad said that her school was able to access eight rather than four NEPS assessments because ‘we

have half the work done and because we have the systems in place that easily identify it'. The 'value' that Sinéad and her school place on NEPS time prompted change in school systems. There is a sense of NEPS time being both a finite and flexible commodity. There is an indication of the value placed by Sinéad's NEPS psychologist on her capacity to produce quality data to inform assessments; this constitutes meaningful collaboration.

Neasa and Nuala spoke about how the value placed on cognitive assessments by some schools can narrow the role of a NEPS psychologist. Nuala said that some SENCOs present NEPS assessments as 'the free service, the free Dyslexia service that came into school and they didn't ever conceptualise it as a systemic role'. The repetition of monetary language reinforces the image of psychology as a commodity. Positioning NEPS as an external service entering the school in the absence of a purposeful systemic role reinforces the idea of NEPS being placed in an assessment silo by schools. When financial value becomes entwined with school values, silos could emerge, reducing potential for whole-school systemic collaboration. Care must be taken to ensure that this analysis does not portray cognitive assessments as inherently negative. As described by Neasa, there is 'huge value' in assessment work: it enables Educational Psychologists to 'sit down and spend an hour and a half with a child' and generate evidence around the child's profile of strengths and needs. Challenges around assessment silos appear to emerge when assessments are valued at the expense of consultation or other systemic work; for instance, Neasa said that schools see consultation 'as a chat. They don't really see it as like an intervention'. Nuala provided insight into the factors necessary to broaden the NEPS role to include consultation:

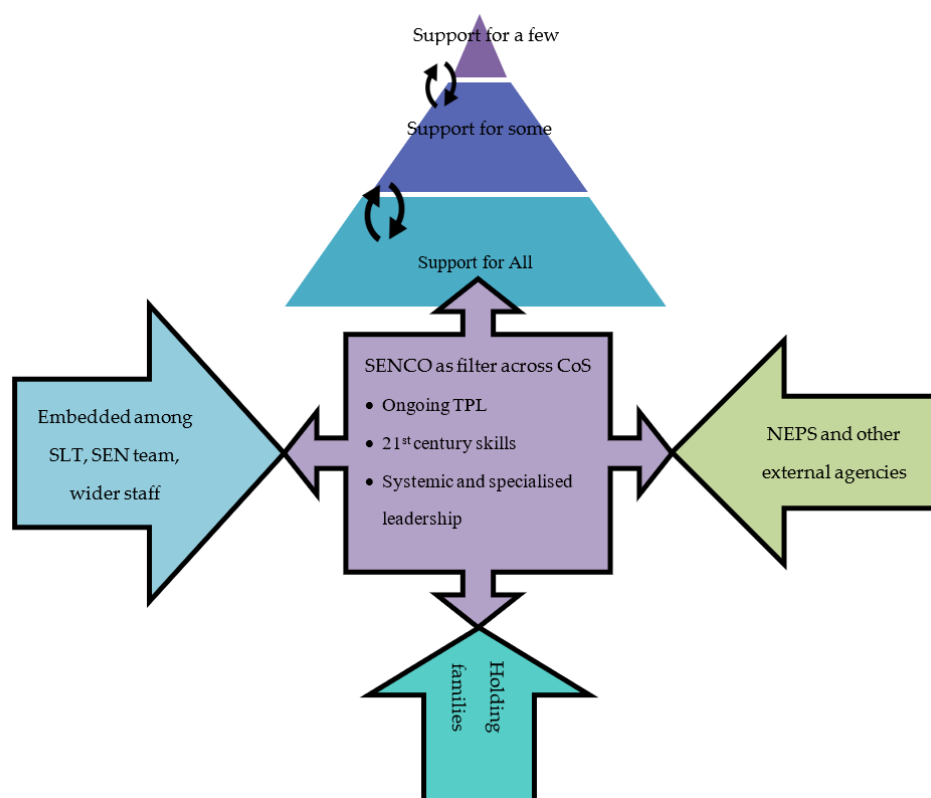
*You really have to be there a while to have developed the relationships that they trust you enough to say, we're going to put the [cognitive assessment] aside for now, we're gonna try this way, and just see if we get the same information.*

Time and trust are positioned as prerequisites for secure relationships with schools, which, in turn, facilitate collaboration. Nuala also said that she spends 'a lot of time investing in the relationships with parents and teachers and principals'. Instead of a financial return on investment, there is an image of a broader NEPS role as a return for investing in interpersonal relationships. This broader role aligns with the idea of NEPS as a collaborative hub, where silos have been opened up by interpersonal relationship-building. Assessments are not removed from this space but are no longer seen as 'magic,' as described by Nuala, and broader aspects are added that would facilitate multi-faceted work across the Continuum of Support.

#### 4. Discussion

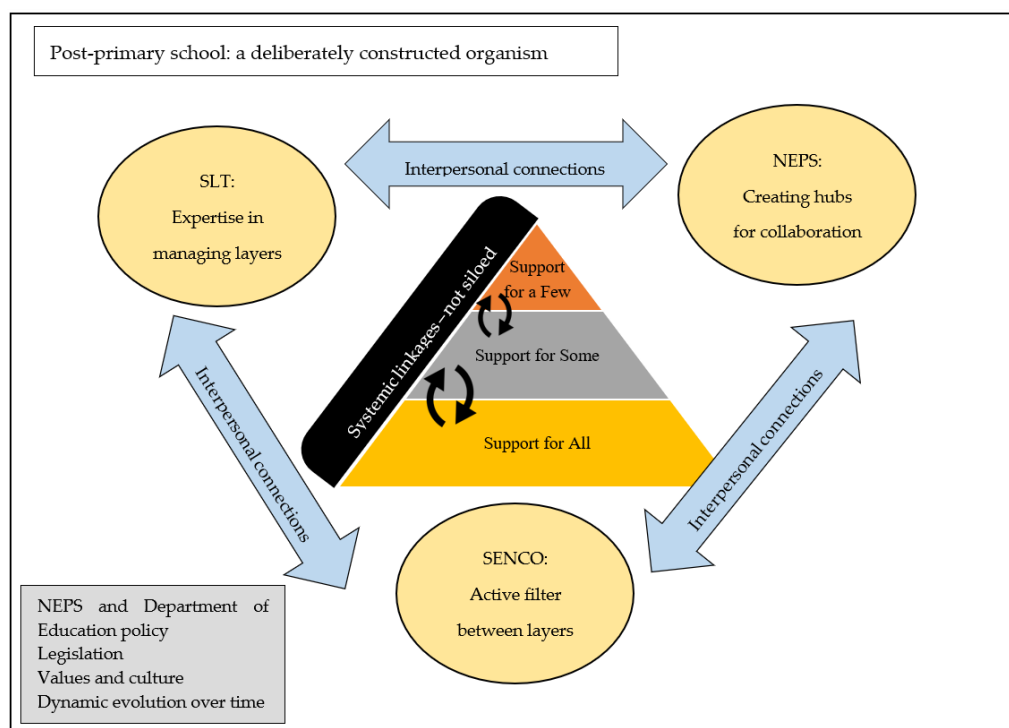
This study explored collaboration between SENCOs, SLT, and NEPS across the Continuum of Support in Irish post-primary schools against the complex policy context of special and inclusive education. The findings highlight the potential for high-quality collaborative practice across the Continuum of Support, reflecting existing research that posits that consultative frameworks have the potential to facilitate meaningful collaboration [25,40,41]. The findings aligned with previous research identifying barriers and facilitators to collaboration. Facilitators of collaboration included an entry process before beginning collaborative work, shared understanding between stakeholders, school staff having up-to-date knowledge of SEN, and NEPS psychologists having a good understanding of individual school contexts. Participants' experiences of these facilitators indicate the potential for high-quality collaborative practice across the Continuum of Support. Barriers to collaboration included diverging understandings of collaboration, insufficient time, and excessive workloads [20,41,42]. Reflecting on these potential barriers to collaboration could indicate pathways towards improving the quality of collaboration between SLT, SENCOs, and NEPS. This study enhances the theoretical framing of collaboration between NEPS and post-primary schools and suggests a theoretical underpinning of the SENCO role, which was identified as a gap in previous research [17,43]. As with previous research, this study found that the SENCO role is nebulous and highly variable across schools [1]. A conceptualisation of the SENCO role incorporating both specialised and systemic elements, embedded

both in the SLT and SEN team, was proposed by [17]. The current research identified similar duality in the experiences of those undertaking the SENCO role, conceptualising SENCOs as an active filter, channelling specialised knowledge across the layers of the school, and playing a role in organisational evolution in conjunction with SLT and NEPS. The novel perspective in the current study brings SENCOs out of an atheoretical bubble [44]; see Figure 3. Following on from the positioning of the SENCO role within leadership structures, there are implications for SENCOs regarding skills development. The dual nature of the SENCO role was identified in the current study, as in previous research [45]. The findings highlighted the importance of a recognised SEN qualification and relevant CPD for SENCOs, perhaps provided by universities or the NCSE support service, reflecting the dual specialised and systemic aspects of the SENCO role. The findings highlighted the importance of SENCOs developing skills and specialised knowledge around meeting students' individual needs and developing interpersonal, leadership, and management skills [17,46]. Building SENCOs' leadership capacity should include supporting skill development in engaging in and facilitating inter-professional collaboration and facilitating change processes in school systems. This requires effective interpersonal skills, as highlighted in this study; SENCOs achieved change by engaging with colleagues in a strengths-focused manner, similar to humble or appreciative inquiry [47]. This study highlighted that the SENCO role, although nebulous and poorly defined in policy, is expanding over time. This involved a personal toll for some participants in terms of tiredness and the emotional weight of the role, and many felt compelled to work after school hours and during holidays. This aligns with previous research indicating that staff members holding middle leadership roles often experience excessive workloads [17,46]. This has implications for SENCOs in terms of prioritising self-care and for SLT to be cognisant of staff members' workloads. There may also be a role for NEPS in facilitating supervision, including peer supervision through SENCO cluster meetings to support SENCOs with the emotional weight of their role.



**Figure 3.** DST-informed conceptualisation of the SENCO role.

Applying DST to participants' experiences of collaboration generated a conceptualisation of post-primary schools as complex organisms, whereby flexibility strengthens schools' ability to adapt and meet all students' needs across the Continuum of Support [26]; see Figure 4. This dynamic view of post-primary schools positions NEPS as co-creators of hubs, constructing space for active collaboration across the Continuum of Support. The NEPS role now spans the Continuum of Support [14]; the findings indicated that, where this was seen as a broadening of the NEPS role to include the whole-school level, collaborative practice was effective in supporting individual needs and organisational change. Barriers to collaboration were more challenging where systems and relationships between NEPS and post-primary schools were restricted to the top of the Continuum of Support. Conceptualising post-primary schools as robust, flexible organisms requires SLT to have oversight of the complex layered processes occurring within the school and between the school NEPS, with all layers of the Continuum of Support being an inherent part of the school system.



**Figure 4.** Conceptualisation of post-primary schools as dynamic systems.

As outlined in Figure 4, this study begins to illuminate theoretical conceptualisation for each role and for collaboration between the three groups; collaboration between all three groups had not been explored in previous research. Based on previous research looking at collaboration between SENCOs and SLT or between SENCOs, NEPS, and parents, it was possible to tentatively identify what the barriers and facilitators to collaboration might be [17,20,25]. The DST lens used in this study goes beyond a theoretical framing of what the barriers and facilitators are by adding the 'how' to the 'what' [37]. Temporal change cuts across each theme identified in Phase 2, developing a conceptualisation of participants' experiences of navigating barriers and facilitators over time to improve practice. In the first theme, participants described navigating interpersonal battlegrounds to establish positive relationships and transcending their role requirements as outlined in policy; this was associated with both personal tolls, such as exhaustion, and a sense of collective endeavour. The second theme illuminated participants' experiences of working between the many layers that make up post-primary school and NEPS systems and skills required by SENCOs, SLT, and NEPS to facilitate smooth linkages between systemic layers. The third



theme identified an image of post-primary schools as living, flexible organisms that are founded upon strong infrastructure. This dynamic understanding of post-primary schools as organisms requires SENCOs, SLT members, and NEPS psychologists to understand their role as dynamic participants in this system [37].

This study was framed against tensions between special and inclusive education. Participants' experiences indicated that more positive and effective collaboration occurred when SEN was an integral part of the school system, across the Continuum of Support, rather than being placed in a separate silo. While Irish policy is in the process of transitioning away from a purely special education approach, the results indicated that the extent to which collaborative practice reflects this policy shift varies considerably across schools. This aligns with previous research suggesting that policy transitions from special to inclusive education are mirrored slowly and inconsistently in practice [25,40,41].

## 5. Implications and Recommendations

### 5.1. NEPS Facilitating Collaboration

NEPS psychologists should be familiar with SENCO status in relation to middle management structures in each school and frameworks for practice, including processes supporting school improvement, such as School Self-Evaluation [39]. This study provides practical ways in which participants have achieved collaboration, which could be applied by NEPS, including an initial contracting process, investing time into relationship building, and actively listening to clarify priorities and ensure that all stakeholders' expertise is equally valued [20,41]. The study highlighted a need for NEPS psychologists to have access to ongoing professional learning to support skills in facilitating collaboration and to ensure that the shift in role focus from gatekeeper to collaborator becomes meaningfully embedded [28].

### 5.2. Formalising the SENCO Role

This study adds to the body of research calling for formalisation of the SENCO role. Utilising middle management structures is currently the only way of formalising the SENCO role [46]. The competencies outlined in policy for formal middle leadership AP1 and II positions are broadly focused on leadership, while this study and extant research found that SENCOs require specialised skills and knowledge and interpersonal and leadership competence [1,24]. Existing AP posts are inappropriate for the SENCO role; these structures are too general and SENCO status largely depends on the value afforded to it by SLT. SLT need to be able to appoint a suitably skilled and qualified SENCO, whose role is delineated separately from pre-existing AP roles. This would position the SENCO as a crucial policy actor involved in translating school and national policies into actions in everyday practice [46]. The findings highlighted the importance of allocating time to the SENCO role, with the possibility of flexibly sharing co-ordination duties between the SENCO and SEN team or rotating the SENCO role. Formalising the role would clarify collaborative co-leadership relationships between SENCOs and SLT. The SENCO role should be clearly defined, with flexibility to adapt to specific school contexts, aligned with the current description of co-ordinating teacher duties [48].

The findings highlighted the importance of a recognised SEN qualification and relevant teacher professional learning for SENCOs, which reflects the dual specialised and systemic aspects of the SENCO role. This study highlighted that the expanding SENCO role involved a personal toll for some participants, reflecting previous research [17,46]. This has implications for SENCOs around prioritising self-care and also for SLT to be cognisant of staff members' workloads. There may be a role for NEPS in facilitating supervision or peer supervision through SENCO cluster meetings.

### 5.3. Teacher Professional Learning

The complexity of collaboration across the Continuum of Support necessitates teacher professional learning for SENCOs and SLT. TPL involves meaningful activities that sup-

port teachers to reflect on and meaningfully improve practice [49,50]. TPL in Ireland is self-directed rather than mandatory. The Teaching Council has a role in promoting and researching ITE and TPL and is responsible for developing Cosán, an overall framework of standards for teachers in Ireland [51]. However, apart from initial teacher education, this TPL is self-directed rather than mandated [51]. SENCOs and SLT have a role in upskilling themselves and staff to create channels for knowledge and skills to filter through a school. Areas for development identified in this study include UDL, problem-solving around the Continuum of Support, and understanding the NEPS role [14,52]. Developing these skills would allow for innovative approaches to inter-professional collaboration. NEPS psychologists have the capacity to support schools to develop collaboration skills [40]. The findings highlighted that schools' needs should be identified jointly with schools to avoid input being imposed upon schools. Provision mapping was mentioned by some participants as having the potential to facilitate collaborative conversations around identifying the needs of a school across the Continuum of Support in a strengths-based and data-informed manner [43]. Given recent changes, clarity on the NEPS role is necessary to share consultative models that have the potential to achieve collaboration.

#### 5.4. Future Research

The scope of this study precludes an in-depth examination of changes needed in policy and practice around ITE; this is the foundation of TPL for post-primary school teachers, including those who become SENCOs or SLT. Formalising the SENCO role should be explicated in future research before being incorporated into policy and practice, for instance, by establishing a SENCO working group. Using existing SENCO forums would be an effective way of connecting policy, research, and practice, in line with communities of practice [43]. NEPS has a role in contributing to this research by facilitating SENCO forums and contributing to theoretical conceptualisation of the SENCO role.

#### 6. Conclusions

Previous research indicated what the barriers and facilitators to collaboration were likely to be but not what it was like to be immersed in the experience of navigating these barriers and facilitators against a changing policy context [17,20]. While previous research in the Irish post-primary context examined the SENCO role individually or in conjunction with SLT [17,43], this study begins to capture the additional complexity of collaboration as a process that occurs not only within schools but also between schools and NEPS. This study provides insight into the relationship between research, practice, and policy regarding such collaboration. Further complexity is added to the collaborative relationship by absence of the SENCO role from policy and tensions around special and/or inclusive education. The results highlighted that schools are trying to implement evidence-based practice in the absence of evidence around best practice for collaboration between SENCOs, SLT, and NEPS. It is necessary to gather and examine practice-based evidence, to which this study has contributed, to identify effective practices that SENCOs, SLT, and NEPS have developed within the current policy vacuum [53]. Large-scale research is necessary to clarify what policy for the SENCO role should look like, how TPL may be structured to ensure that SENCOs and SLT are equipped to engage in collaboration, and how the NEPS role can be further clarified and communicated to schools to ensure that collaboration can create spaces within which all students can be appropriately supported across the Continuum of Support.

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