

Physical education, resources and training: The perspective of special educational needs coordinators working in secondary schools in North-West England

Anthony John Maher

University of Central Lancashire, UK

Jessica Louise Macbeth

University of Central Lancashire, UK

European Physical Education Review
1–14

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1356336X13496003

epe.sagepub.com



Abstract

The Code of Practice of the Department for Education (1994) establishes the role of special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) to help facilitate the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools. SENCOs, thus, should form an integral part of the culture of all departments, including physical education (PE). This paper draws on the concept of hegemony to examine the processes and practices that shape the experiences and views of SENCOs and ultimately, the extent to which they facilitate an inclusive culture in PE. Our findings, generated via an online survey, suggested that most SENCOs are not a part of the senior management team (SMT) and do not have control of the SEN budget. The majority of SENCOs acknowledge, and often reinforce, the hegemonic status of English, mathematics and science *vis-à-vis* the prioritisation of SEN resources, which may constrain the ability of teachers to provide meaningful experiences for pupils with SEN in other subjects, such as PE. While 93% of SENCOs did not have PE-specific training for their role, 52% suggested that the learning support assistants (LSAs) in their school are not adequately trained to include pupils with SEN in PE. This is perhaps surprising, given that it is SENCOs themselves who are largely responsible for the training of LSAs. In conclusion, from the evidence provided by SENCOs, PE does not appear to constitute a

Corresponding author:

Anthony John Maher, School of Sport, Tourism and the Outdoors, Greenbank Building, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, Lancashire, UK.

Email: amaher@uclan.ac.uk

significant dimension of their training programmes and SENCOs themselves may further subordinate PE, in the process of training LSAs. This may call into question the ability of both SENCOs and LSAs to contribute to the cultivation of an inclusive culture in PE.

Keywords

Hegemony, inclusion, learning support assistant, physical education, special education, special education needs, special educational needs coordinators

Introduction

The 1981 Education Act (Department of Education and Science, 1981) of the UK stimulated a gradual and partial transference of pupils from special to mainstream schools in Britain (Thomas and Smith, 2009). It was partial, insofar as it was largely those pupils who were deemed to have 'less severe' difficulties (for example, physical impairments) whom joined the mainstream educational system, whilst many of those pupils with 'more severe' difficulties (for example, multiple impairments) tended to remain in the special school sector (Halliday, 1993). The transference process, together with the introduction of the concept of special educational needs (SEN) (Department of Education and Science, 1978), led to as many as 20% of mainstream school pupils being identified as needing support that was additional to that offered to their age-peers (Vickerman, 2007). For the first time, in many cases, mainstream schools in Britain were (and still are) expected, through the legal requirements set out in the 1981 Education Act (Department of Education and Science, 1981), to provide an inclusive environment for those with SEN.

SEN refers to those pupils who have a learning difficulty that calls for special educational provisions to be made for them (Audit Commission, 2002). Thus, the term 'pupils with SEN' generally refers to those pupils (some of whom may or may not be legally classified as disabled) whom have a particular learning need which arises from a wide range of difficulties, including physical, cognitive, sensory, communicative or behavioural difficulties (Audit Commission, 2002).

It was the Code of Practice (Department for Education, 1994) that established the role of Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in order to help facilitate the inclusion of pupils with SEN into mainstream primary and secondary schools in Britain. A SENCO is an educational specialist whose remit involves liaising with and advising teachers, parents, senior management team (SMT) and external agencies *vis-à-vis* the inclusion of pupils with SEN. They are also charged with the task of inclusion training of staff, managing learning support assistants (LSAs), assessing pupils with SEN, and managing the records and statements of pupils with SEN (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009). In short, the role of SENCO was created and is maintained to enable all teachers to include pupils with SEN in their lessons.

In much of the, albeit limited, research available in Britain (see, for examples: Audit Commission, 2002; Maher, 2010; Morley et al., 2005; Smith and Green, 2004), some physical education (PE) teachers suggest that their ability to include pupils with SEN has been constrained, to varying degrees, by the tendency of their SENCO to neglect them in terms of information, support and resources. For example, many PE teachers suggest that the prioritisation of English, mathematics and science, when it comes to the allocation of LSAs, has had a detrimental impact of their ability to include pupils with SEN (Maher, 2010; Morley, 2005; Smith and Green, 2004). Moreover, many

statements of SEN, which identify the pupil's specific learning requirements and the support that they should receive to ensure they are included in mainstream education (Department for Education and Skills, 2001), relate to classroom-based subjects and do little to advise teachers of the physical capabilities of pupils (Morley et al., 2005; Smith and Green, 2004). Thus, it is often up to PE teachers to judge the needs of these pupils and endeavour to develop suitable provision.

The revised Code of Practice (Department for Education and Skills, 2001): set out, amongst other things, 'a framework for effective school based support with less paper work', yet in a survey conducted by the National Union for Teachers (NUT) (2004), although 45% of SENCOs reported that the revised Code of Practice was more manageable than its predecessor, 74% reported that it had *not* led to a reduction in workload. This was attributed to an expansion of the role during recent years, largely because of increased administrative duties and teaching responsibilities, which had further constrained the time available to SENCOs to fulfil the full remit of their role (Cole, 2005; Cowne, 2005; NUT, 2004). Additionally, 88% of SENCOs in Cole's (2005) study felt that, since the revised Code of Practice, there has in fact been an increase in workload, because of growing legislation in Britain, such as the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act* (SENDA) (Stationary Office, 2001), which provides a legal right to all pupils with SEN to a mainstream education. Such issues were similarly unearthed in a report by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Cabinet Office Regulatory Impact Unit (2004), which offered over 30 recommendations to reduce bureaucratic policies, procedures and practices, in order to try to free up some time for SENCOs. The influence of these recommendations remains to be seen.

The fact that many SENCOs are not a member of the SMT, despite the British government advocating that they should be (The Education and Skills Committee, 2006), is also highlighted as a major constraint on their overall role (Cowne, 2005; Szwed, 2007; Weddell, 2004). The extent to which these SENCOs can facilitate the inclusion of pupils with SEN in the curriculum specifically, and the culture of the school generally, could be restricted due to their lack of access to a key decision-making position within the SMT. Indeed, when SENCOs are part of the SMT and have no teaching responsibilities, they typically report having few difficulties managing their roles effectively: they have more time to implement curriculum interventions, and to consult with and train colleagues (Szwed, 2007). Thus, the appointment of SENCO to the SMT may enable them to make a more active contribution to the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools in Britain. Even so, the structure and content of the curriculum can also constrain the extent to which pupils with SEN are included in PE. Indeed, research suggests (for examples, see: Fitzgerald, 2005; Maher, 2010; Morley et al., 2005; Smith and Green, 2004) that one outcome of the emphasis placed on performance, achievement and skill development in competitive sport and team games is that many pupils with SEN have been and will continue to be excluded, by degrees, from the same opportunities and experiences provided for some of their age-peers in PE.

According to Cowne (2005: 67), 'the modern SENCO has to be master of many trades', possibly because of the wide and diverse nature of SEN policy, processes and practice in Britain. Training and professional experience can help to equip SENCOs with the knowledge, skills, experience and confidence that their role demands; and SENCOs suggest that the training that they have undertaken has helped them to: liaise with and train LSAs; organise and support pupils with SEN; and work with other staff, professionals and parents (Cowne, 2005); however, no research has analysed the training needs nor experiences of SENCOs in relation to PE, an issue to be explored in this paper.

In many schools in Britain, the management of LSAs has increasingly become a dimension of the role of SENCOs, which was outlined in the revised Code of Practice (DfES, 2001).

Nevertheless, research conducted by Szwed (2007) suggests that, in practice, it is often unclear who is managing, working with, or supporting LSAs. More often than not, these responsibilities are divided, not necessarily uniformly, amongst SENCOs, SMT, and the subject teachers themselves; which can lead to confusion, due to a lack of coherence and communication within, and between, schools (Szwed, 2007). Although not yet evidenced in the available research, one potential outcome of an inconsistent and incoherent support mechanism in some schools could be that some pupils with SEN will not get the support that their specific needs require. Therefore, the role and responsibility of all those involved in the inclusion of pupils with SEN, which was clearly outlined in the revised Code of Practice (DfES, 2001), needs to be understood and performed by each member of staff, to ensure that there is no neglect nor duplication of tasks.

The inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream PE has allegedly been compromised, according to some teachers, by the tendency of LSAs to place varying degrees of constraint upon the everyday activities of PE teachers (Maher, 2010; Smith and Green, 2004). Many of the LSAs who work in mainstream schools are more like classroom-based assistants and their lack of specialist PE training and experience has meant that some PE teachers consider LSAs 'more of a hindrance than a help' when it comes to the influence their presence has on the effectiveness of their teaching (Smith and Green, 2004: 601). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that PE teachers in research conducted by Maher (2010) believe that PE-specific training would go some way to equip LSAs with the knowledge, skill and experience needed in PE, a point which is echoed in Vickerman and Blundell (2012), by LSAs whom had received some form of PE-specific training. This could be formal training, as part of the National Qualifications framework (Learning and Skills Council, 2004) or of a more informal nature, delivered by a SENCO and/or PE specialist.

Some PE teachers and, for that matter, some pupils with SEN, view the presence of LSAs in PE lessons as having a detrimental impact on the learning and social interaction of pupils with SEN (Fitzgerald et al., 2003a, 2003b; Smith and Green, 2004), which is particularly noteworthy given that many pupils with SEN consider the social element of PE as being one of the most important (Atkinson and Black, 2006). Therefore, despite the fact that LSAs are employed as, amongst other things, a conduit to the inclusion of pupils with SEN, one consequence of their presence in PE is that they could do more to fortify, rather than ameliorate, barriers between pupils with and without SEN. It is in light of the perceived inadequacy of the support systems that have been embedded in the culture of many schools that this paper explores the relationship between SENCOs and LSAs generally, and as it relates to PE in particular.

There are two main shortcomings of previous research: first, research on the inclusion of pupils with SEN in PE neglects the perspective of SENCOs; and second, research relating to the role of SENCOs in mainstream schools is generic and neglects PE. It is in light of these gaps that this paper intends to answer, from the perspective of SENCOs working in secondary schools in North-West England, the following key research questions:

1. To what extent do SENCOs control SEN resources?
2. How are SEN resources allocated and what impact does this have on PE?
3. How do SENCOs view the role and training of LSAs, in relation to PE?
4. Are SENCOs adequately trained to fulfil the remit of their role, as it relates to PE?

In doing so, it is hoped that this paper will result in a more balanced understanding of this relatively neglected area of educational research. It is noteworthy that little of the research available was undertaken from an explicitly sociological perspective. Of the research that does draw explicitly on

sociological theory (see, for example: Fitzgerald, 2005; Smith and Green, 2004), none use Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to analyse the ways in which SENCO experiences are shaped by hegemonic ideology, processes and practices within the context of their particular school and at the level of government (Hoare and Smith, 1971). Whilst some of these processes and practices may work to facilitate the inclusion of pupils with SEN, others may not. By applying the concept of hegemony, this analysis intends to identify how hegemonic processes and practices enable and constrain SENCOs to facilitate an inclusive culture in PE. In addition, the analysis aims to offer some understanding of how SENCOs themselves play a part in reinforcing or challenging hegemonic processes and practices.

In this paper, hegemony refers to the ways in which some individuals and groups gain positions of authority; thus, enabling them to maintain power, control and engineer consensus (Sissel and Sheard, 2001) over: (a) the nature and purpose of PE; (b) the importance attributed to PE and SEN in an educational context; (c) how SEN resources are distributed across subjects in schools; (d) attention to PE in SEN training; and (e) the legitimization of discourse underpinning SEN policy and practice, all of which ultimately shape the extent to which an inclusive school and PE culture develops. An inclusive PE culture refers to policies, learning, teaching, and assessment being developed and implemented in ways which ensure that all pupils can have meaningful experiences in PE and achieve success, rather than the process whereby pupils with SEN are expected to assimilate into the structure of the National Curriculum Physical Education (NCPE) and the established arrangements of PE lessons that are intended for those pupils without SEN (Fredrickson and Cline, 2002).

It is the control of the means of cultural production, such as educational institutions, that enables more powerful groups to disseminate ideology through cultural mechanisms, such as SEN policy and practice generally, and the national curriculum specifically, in order to maintain their dominant position, achieve their objectives and ultimately, determine the extent to which PE is inclusive for pupils with SEN. One outcome of the dissemination of dominant groups' seemingly ubiquitous hegemonic ideology is that many cultural practices, experiences and institutions become skewed to favour the dominant groups. Accordingly, what often appears to be common culture in an educational context is, in fact, no more than an indication of hegemony (Hall, 1981); however, hegemony is not static, it is process-oriented and dynamic, insofar as subordinate groups are not simply wilfully obedient to dominant groups; they are often recalcitrant toward the dominant control. Therefore, dominant groups must win the consent of subordinate groups, a process that involves often uneven contestation, struggle, resistance and negotiation; and is, therefore, a dynamic process that holds the possibility of victory for subordinate groups (Barker, 2008). So, whilst SENCOs may be actively involved in reinforcing educational ideology, they can challenge or reject to varying degrees the wants and wishes of the more powerful groups of their relational network.

Methodology

Having reviewed the literature relating to the inclusion of pupils with SEN in PE in the previous section, the following key themes emerged as warranting a more in-depth investigation: (a) role and responsibilities; (b) support; (c) training and qualifications; and (d) SEN resources, each of which formed a section of a web survey distributed to SENCOs. These surveys aimed to gather the views and experiences of SENCOs *vis-à-vis* the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream secondary school PE, in North-West England. The web survey did not provide a working definition

of SEN, thus leaving its interpretation to SENCOs. We used both open and closed questions throughout, to ensure that, whilst a richness of data could be gathered, the survey was not too laborious and time consuming (Neuman, 2011).

Ten SENCOs were purposely selected (Silverman, 2011) for the piloting of the survey on the basis that, first, they were currently working in mainstream secondary schools *outside* of North-West England; and, second, that they were willing to participate in the research. These SENCOs were accessed via a gatekeeper who worked and was part of a network of SENCOs in the North-East of England. SENCOs working outside of North-West England were targeted to ensure that none would be excluded from the research, when the survey was distributed to wider populations. The piloting helped to identify unnecessary, ambiguous and difficult-to-answer questions, logistical problems of the proposed method, and to ensure that the questions allowed for a range of responses and were able to elicit the information required.

In order to gain access to SENCOs for the survey's wider dissemination, we obtained the contact details of each mainstream secondary school in North-West England from council websites. From this, we acquired the telephone number and electronic mail (email) address of the entire sampling frame of 414 schools. Next, a telephone call to each of the schools secured either the SENCO's direct email address ($n = 246$; 59%) or the school email address, together with the name of the SENCO and the promise that the email would be forwarded to them ($n = 168$; 41%). Bryman (2012) suggests that the response rates of web-based surveys are generally lower than their postal equivalent. Therefore, our research used a modified version of Dillman's (2007) tailored design method's participant contact strategy, which was developed to yield higher response rates for web surveys. Phase 1 involved the sending of an email to each of the 414 SENCOs working in mainstream secondary schools in North-West England, which contained a cover letter explaining the study and a hyperlink to the web survey. After 7–10 days, a 'thank you' and reminder email was sent as Phase 2, not to overcome resistance but rather to 'jog memories and rearrange priorities' (Dillman, 2007: 179). Dillman et al. (1974) suggest that a thank you message and reminder can produce a response burst nearly equal to that which followed the first stage of contact. For Phase 3, a final reminder and hyperlink to the web survey was sent 2 weeks later, for those who may have lost or deleted the original email, because research suggests that multiple contacts are more effective than any other technique for increasing responses to surveys by email (Shaefer and Dillman, 1998).

The contact strategy resulted in 135 of 414 SENCOs (33%) starting the web survey, with 90 (22%) answering every question. Data from those who partially completed the survey was used together with data from those who answered every question. The number of women who started the web survey ($n = 119$; 88%) far outweighed the number of men ($n = 16$; 12%). The age ranges were as follows: five SENCO (4%) aged 20–29 years, 30 (22%) aged 30–39 years, 39 (29%) aged 40–49 years, 54 (40%) aged 50–59 years and seven (5%) aged 60–69 years. In relation to the overall time spent working as a SENCO: 11 (10%) of those who answered were in the role < 1 year, 39 (35%) from 1–5 years, 23 (20%) from 5–10 years, 12 (11%) from 10–15 years and 27 (24%) for over 15 years.

We analysed all quantitative data using *Survey Monkey* and Microsoft Excel to perform descriptive statistics, whilst the qualitative data gathered via open questions were subjected to thematic analysis. This entailed the reading and coding of responses, in order to identify recurring themes and patterns of behaviour present in the data (Bryman, 2012; Saldana, 2009). Our findings are organised and discussed under the key themes that emerged from the coding: control of SEN resources, allocation of SEN resources, SENCOs views on LSAs and SENCO training.

Control of SEN resources

Findings from the web survey suggest that 71% of SENCOs are not a part of the SMT, despite the British government recommending that they should be (The Education and Skills Committee, 2006). Whilst the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools is a process mediated by much of the relational network, including, amongst others, teachers and support staff; the fact that most SENCOs are not a member of a group that makes key decisions relating to school policies and resources, could constrain their ability to coordinate whole-school developments. The important point here is that the British government only 'recommended' that SENCOs form part of the SMT; the government has not used its power as a developer of education policy and state-school funder to make it a legal requirement. This resulted in different schools embracing the government's recommendation to varying extents, with the majority in this study rejecting it. Instead, much of the power resides with school governors, whom must determine the role of the SENCO in relation to the leadership and management of the school (Department of Children Schools and Families, 2009), a process that is likely to continue, in light of the coalition government's promise to fashion 'a radically different system' that transfers power to 'front-line' professionals, parents and local communities (Department for Education, 2011b: 4).

We found that 29 of the 31 SENCOs whom are SMT members believe that they are able to do their job more effectively as part of the team, whilst 48 of 71 SENCOs whom are not members, believe that they could do their job more effectively if part of the SMT. For example, SENCO #10 suggested that being a part of SMT has allowed the SENCO 'to have a more strategic approach . . . to get things done and for SEN to be a school priority', whereas SENCO #4, who is not a member of the SMT, suggested that he/she would have a 'more authoritative role in whole school policy and decisions', if part of the SMT. Similarly, SENCO #79 believes that inclusion in SMT would stop SEN being 'frequently overlooked in strategy planning'. The points made here support those made by many other SENCOs in this research, whom suggest that being a member of the SMT would enable them to ensure that 'SEN has a voice' (SENCO #17), when it comes to whole-school strategic planning.

The benefits of being a part of SMT aside, it is noteworthy that, whilst the hegemonic discourse of the British government outlined in the *Education and Skills Committee Report* (2006: 74) points towards at least an ideological commitment to increasing the power and influence of SENCOs, by stating that 'SENCOs should in all cases be . . . in a senior management position in the school . . . The role and position of a SENCO must reflect the central priority that SEN should hold within schools', many in this study support research conducted elsewhere (Cowne, 2005; Szwed, 2007) when they suggest that their exclusion from SMT has constrained their practice. In a study by Weddell (2004) many SENCOs suggest that, because they were excluded from SMT, they were rarely allowed to manage the SEN budget, and as a result, were unaware of how much money was allocated to SEN in their school or each individual department, such as PE. Here, it was the SMT who monopolised the economic resources, which they were distributing in ways that facilitated the achievement of their own inclusion objectives, often without consulting SENCOs (Weddell, 2004).

It is interesting to note that 16% of SENCOs in this study have no responsibility for the SEN budget, whereas 23% are partially responsible, 16% are jointly responsible, 21% are mainly responsible and 24% are wholly responsible. Therefore, in some schools there appears to be a general lack of power for SENCOs to control the economic resources. This point is particularly interesting, given that it is the SENCOs, not the SMT, whom are the inclusion experts. Whilst SMT

may be more adequately equipped with the knowledge, skill and experience to manage school finance, whether that includes the SEN budget or not, they are perhaps not the most appropriate group for identifying areas of need nor distributing SEN resources to cater for the identified need. Indeed, although teachers and support staff also play a crucial role in inclusion; thus, may be able to assist SENCOs in the identification of need and distribution of resources, it is the SENCO who has SEN expertise.

Findings from this study suggested that many SENCOs question the way in which the SEN budget is spent. The most frequently-cited criticism relates to the fact that 'the SEN budget only takes statements into account. No additional provision is made for School Action (SA) or SA plus' (SENCO #29). Similarly, SENCO #81 argues: 'statemented pupils are well provided for. Pupils with specific difficulties at SA or SA plus are not'. Here, some SENCOs appeared to suggest that those who control the SEN budget and distribute resources do not appreciate that SEN is a concept that encompasses a much broader group of pupils than those who are statemented. There is also concern amongst some SENCOs about the 'lack of clarity about how it [the budget] is allocated and what it is used for' (SENCO #35). One SENCO summarises thus: 'budget allocation is not transparent to the SENCO and staffing is not sufficient to support the number of students with additional needs on the register' (SENCO #13). Given their remit and expertise in relation to the specific needs and requirements of pupils with SEN, it may be expected that all SENCOs should be at least jointly responsible for the SEN budget, but over one-third in this research have only partial or no responsibility. Whilst nearly two-thirds of the SENCOs are at least jointly responsible for the SEN budget, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent they distribute SEN resources to facilitate the inclusion of pupils with SEN in PE, specifically. The next section analyses the allocation of SEN resources by subject and explores the relationship between SENCOs, SMT and PE teachers.

Allocation of SEN resources

The web survey asked SENCOs to identify any subjects that they perceived to be prioritised in their school when it comes to the allocation of SEN resources. While 67% of respondents rate English as the highest priority; 55% rate mathematics as of the highest priority; and 38% rate science the highest priority. The disparity between science (ranked third) and Information and communications technology (ICT) (ranked fourth) was notable, with only 10% of SENCOs suggesting that ICT is of the highest priority in their school. Of particular interest is that 8% of SENCOs rank PE as one of the highest priorities, meaning that overall, SENCOs perceive PE to rank eighth out of 11 subjects, in a hierarchy of SEN resource priority. Only languages, religious education and art, according to the SENCOs, receive fewer SEN resources. When it comes to SEN resources, it appears to be a common practice to subordinate PE in favour of most other subjects, in many schools.

When asked why some subjects were prioritised over others, the most frequent response related to government targets and school performance tables. One SENCO articulated a view held by many, in that 'core subjects are prioritised, especially English and mathematics, as these are the subjects which schools are rated on' (SENCO #30). Similarly, another SENCO suggested that 'the SMT will always want these areas [English and mathematics] prioritised because of the accountability of schools for exam grades in these areas and the positive knock on effect in other subjects' (SENCO #105). Here, this SENCO appeared to emphasise the power and influence of SMT when it comes to the allocation of SEN resources; however, although the power to control budgets and set wages, curriculum and targets has been devolved to some schools, and further plans are underway to extend this to all schools (Department for Education, 2011a), because of the

perceived decline in educational standards in Britain (Department for Education, 2010); the findings from this research suggested that it is the British government who appear to be one of the most powerful groups, insofar as it is their standards agenda, that emphasises academic attainment in so-called 'core' subjects, that is constraining SMTs and SENCOs to allocate resources in ways that help them to achieve the British government's educational objectives. Many of the SENCOs in this study therefore suggested that a hegemonic educational ideology relating to academic achievement in English, mathematics and science pervades much of their school and SEN department, which has been diffused by government through the discourse underpinning policy documents (see, for example: Department for Education, 2010, 2012) and is supported by SMT. From the evidence provided in this section, the prioritisation of such subjects appeared as a common culture – the way things are (Barker, 2008) – amongst SMT and, for that matter, SENCOs. Indeed, many of the SENCOs in this study appeared to have accepted and are actively promoting this educational ideology. When asked if they agreed with this prioritisation of subjects, 78% said yes, whilst 22% answered no. Additionally, the survey data provided no evidence to suggest that any of the 22% who did not agree with this prioritisation had actively challenged it.

In terms explaining why they support the prioritisation of English, mathematics and science, one SENCO asserted that 'if we do not equip students with basic numeracy and literacy skills they cannot access much of the curriculum or be prepared for the demands of adult life' (SENCO #27). These comments echo those made by many other SENCOs, insomuch as the most frequently cited justification for prioritising English and mathematics, related to an ideological belief that success in these subjects forms the foundation of learning, and thus, would enable access to all other areas of the curriculum. Another SENCO supported this by suggesting that 'if you can't read and write you'll struggle to access other subjects' (SENCO #56). Again, these views appear to support the hegemonic educational ideology of the government, which promotes attainment in literacy and numeracy. It is important to qualify that this paper is not attempting to proselytise by arguing that this is an inappropriate use of resources; in fact, some SENCOs in this study argued that it is the most appropriate way of allocating scarce resources as 'it has to happen due to limited funds' (SENCO #52), but this prioritisation of resources could have a negative impact on the inclusion of pupils with SEN in subordinated subjects, such as PE. While much equipment designed to aid the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools (computer software packages and hearing aids, for example) can be purchased from the funds controlled and designated by the SMT and/or SENCO and utilised across most of the curriculum, much of the equipment required in PE is subject-specific; for example: larger, softer and/or brighter balls (Thomas and Smith, 2009). The burden, thus, often befalls the PE department, which could potentially constrain the development of an inclusive PE culture. In fact, one outcome of the financial strain placed on some PE departments was that organisations such as the Youth Sports Trust (YST) have provided PE equipment, in an attempt to facilitate inclusion (Thomas and Smith, 2009). This paper now turns to an analysis of SENCOs' views on the role and allocation of LSAs, a prominent theme which emerged from the data analysis.

SENCO views on LSAs

Research (for example Maher, 2010; Morley et al., 2005; Smith and Green, 2004) has questioned whether LSA training is fit for purpose within the context of PE. In relation to this, 58% of SENCOs in this study suggested that the school in which they work does not provide PE-specific training opportunities for LSAs and 52% suggested that the LSAs in their school are not adequately

trained to include pupils with SEN in PE. This may at first seem somewhat surprising, given that it is SENCOs themselves who are responsible for selecting, supervising and training LSAs, or ensuring that training is provided by external agents (Department of Children Schools and Families, 2009). Nevertheless, the fact that research conducted by Vickerman and Blundell (2012), from the perspective of LSAs, supports these claims give them some credibility. So, despite National Occupational Standards being developed and a range of professional qualifications – from NVQs to foundation degrees – emerging (Learning and Skills Council, 2004) to ensure that LSAs are adequately prepared for their role, many SENCOs here and LSAs elsewhere (Vickerman and Blundell, 2012) believe that some LSAs are unable to fulfil the full remit of their role, as it relates to PE. Accordingly, PE does not appear to constitute a significant dimension of LSA training programmes. If the neglect of PE in LSA training programmes continues, then there is a risk that the presence of some LSAs could result in the subordination and stigmatisation of some pupils with SEN in PE (Fitzgerald et al., 2003a, 2003b; Maher, 2010; Smith and Green, 2004).

This issue brings an important point into sharp focus: Much like PE teachers, LSAs are not effete; rather, they do have some power and influence as key drivers of the inclusion process at the delivery level, even if it is that their involvement in PE can constrain the actions of some teachers and have a potentially negative impact on the inclusion of some pupils with SEN in PE. A deeper exploration from the perspective of LSAs is warranted, in order to offer a more balanced understanding of their role in the inclusion of pupils with SEN in PE, and the extent to which they are enabled or constrained by, or indeed contribute to maintaining, hegemonic processes and practices. The focus in this section is on SENCOs' views of the training of LSAs, due to the responsibility they have in this area. This paper now turns to SENCOs' perspectives on their own training and the extent to which they think PE does and should receive specific attention.

SENCO training

Of the SENCOs in this study, 79% state that they have undertaken some form of training, which was usually generic and classroom-based; however, 93% of SENCOs suggested that they have not had any PE-specific training for their role. The fact that many SENCOs have undertaken some form of training is perhaps unsurprising, in that teachers new to the role of SENCO must undergo a nationally-approved training course (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009). Nonetheless, the findings perhaps bring into question the ability of SENCOs to advise PE teachers, provide staff inclusion training and manage the records and statements of pupils, at least in a PE context. It cannot be assumed that the generic classroom-based training that many SENCOs and, for that matter, LSAs undertake (Vickerman and Blundell, 2012) will be relevant to a more physically-orientated subject such as PE, especially when some of those pupils who have a SEN in PE may not necessarily have one in classroom-based subjects, because of its contextual nature (DfES, 2001). Given that 'the modern SENCO has to be master of many trades' (Cowne, 2005: 67), because of the wide and diverse nature of SEN policy and practice, it does not seem unreasonable to expect that SENCO training programmes should focus on PE as a comparatively unique learning environment. This may help SENCOs to improve their practice and clarify their role (Cowne, 2005) as it relates to PE. Again, these findings emphasise a hegemonic educational ideology which subordinates PE as a curricular subject, by neglecting it within SENCO training programmes.

The survey probed SENCOs' perspectives of their training further, and when asked why they had not undertaken any PE-specific training, over one-half (57%) suggested that they do not think it is germane to their role, a typical response being 'I am not sure why I would! Why would this be

relevant to being a SENCO?' (SENCO #59). Other SENCOs elaborated on this, asserting that PE-specific training 'has no relevance in the same way that I have not done any special training in Physics or Design or Music, etc. I seek information and specific knowledge and strategies from the experts in those departments' (SENCO #25). It could be argued that such a response does not seem to take account of PE being a physically-oriented subject and the challenges this may pose, in terms of including some pupils with SEN. Another common view is exemplified by SENCO #46, whom suggested that 'a couple of LSAs on my team have been trained to cater for the needs of our physically disabled pupils in PE and I just supervise them and respond to what they need'. Similarly, SENCO #50 revealed, 'I do not cover or support PE. I have teaching assistants that [sic] have taken courses'. So some SENCOs believe that it is LSAs, not themselves, who should undertake PE-specific training. The potential issue here is that, without engaging in PE-specific training themselves, SENCOs are unlikely to appreciate fully the distinct challenges that the physical nature of PE may pose in terms of inclusion.

Although it has the potential to increase their influence, there are notable limitations to empowering PE teachers and LSAs in this way. For example, as already stated, the findings of this paper and research conducted by Vickerman and Blundell (2012) suggest that many LSAs have not undergone PE-specific training, either because opportunities are not available or because they are not taking advantage of the opportunities that are available. Furthermore, it is questionable to place the onus on PE teachers, given that first, the onus is rarely placed on teachers of classroom-based subjects; and second, many PE teachers suggest that their initial teacher training (ITT) and Continued professional development (CPD) programmes have not adequately equipped them with the knowledge, skill, experience and confidence to include pupils with SEN in PE (Maher, 2010; Morley et al., 2005; Smith and Green, 2004). Nevertheless, in some schools, a situation seems to be present wherein the knowledge, skill and experience of those involved in the inclusion process in PE is limited, which may constrain the development of inclusive education provision and practice that is appropriate in this subject.

The majority (82%) of SENCOs in this study suggested that they have either a very good or good working relationship with the PE department, whilst 18% deemed it satisfactory, and none either poor or very poor. This finding is worth noting, given that in research conducted elsewhere (Maher, 2010; Morley et al., 2005) many PE teachers are rather critical of the working relationship they have with SENCOs. Many suggest that they are rarely consulted when it comes to the distribution of information, the allocation of resources and the development of SEN provision. This point is particularly interesting, insofar as government charges SENCOs with the task of: (a) advising teachers about differentiated teaching methods appropriate for individual pupils with SEN; and (b) contributing to in-service training for teachers, to enable them to include pupils with SEN in their lessons (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009). Why so many SENCOs view the relationship so positively is open to interpretation. Perhaps it is because they do have relatively little dealings with PE teachers. This is one of a number of issues that are highlighted in the conclusion, for further analysis in future research.

Conclusion

This paper set out to analyse the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream secondary school PE in Britain, from the perspective of SENCOs, whose views and experiences have been largely neglected hitherto. Most SENCOs in this study are not members of the SMT, which could constrain their ability to coordinate whole-school developments, and develop provision and inclusive practice in PE, because of a lack of access to power in the form of this key decision-making position.

Similarly, there appeared to be a general lack of access to power, *vis-à-vis* the control of economic resources, because of the hegemony of the SMT. In many schools, it is the SMT who monopolise the economic resources, which they distribute in ways that facilitate the achievement of the British government's educational objectives, which relate to improving performance in core subjects, as part of the Standards agenda. When it comes to SEN provision, a hegemonic educational ideology that subordinates PE appeared to be common culture, and seems not to be challenged by SENCOS in many schools. Future research should analyse the impact of resource constraints on the inclusion of pupils with SEN in subordinated subjects, such as PE.

It is important to qualify that based on the evidence presented in this paper, it cannot be assumed that a shift in power to SENCOS would necessarily have a positive impact on the process of inclusion in PE. The extent to which greater power and influence for SENCOS, in terms of decision-making and control of SEN resources, would result in them repositioning PE within the subject hierarchy, and redistributing resources accordingly, is difficult to ascertain. In fact, it seems clear that some SENCOS do not regard PE as a priority, or even a subject that is or should be anything but peripheral, when it comes to the inclusion agenda. Whether SENCOS' perspectives in this regard are unconsciously shaped by hegemonic ideology, processes and practices; or whether they play a conscious role in producing these, is not yet clear. Future research should intend to explore this in more detail.

Despite SENCOS themselves being largely responsible for selecting, supervising and training LSAs (Department for Children Schools Families, 2009), and many acknowledging that LSAs in their school are not adequately trained to include pupils with SEN in PE, there appeared to be very limited consideration of the need for PE-specific training opportunities by SENCOS. Thus, questions are raised regarding the desire of SENCOS to contribute to the cultivation of an inclusive culture, in PE at least; however, whilst these findings contributed to an initial understanding of the views and experiences of SENCOS, future research needs to:

1. Provide a more in-depth understanding of SENCO perspectives; and
2. Analyse the inclusion of pupils with SEN in PE from the perspective of LSAs, whose views and experiences in relation to PE have been largely neglected.

The subordination of PE as a curricular subject is perhaps further reflected in the fact that most SENCOS suggest that they too have not had any PE-specific training for their role. In addition, a number of SENCOS seem to be dismissive of this need, directing it towards LSAs and PE teachers. The findings, therefore, bring into question the ability of SENCOS to advise PE teachers, provide staff inclusion training, and manage the records and statements of pupils, at least in a PE context. The implications here are that there needs to be a clear understanding regarding responsibility and an effective working relationship between SENCOS, LSAs and PE teachers; however, it is appreciated that even with a clear understanding and a good working relationship, other constraints can undermine the extent to which these three parties can facilitate an inclusive PE culture. These issues will be analysed in more detail in future research. To end, it is hoped that by gathering and analysing the views and experiences of SENCOS in relation to PE, this paper has gone some way toward redressing this previously neglected aspect of academic research, will stimulate further analysis and will have the potential to inform inclusion policy, as it relates to the subject of PE.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Atkinson H and Black K (2006) *The Experiences of Young Disabled People Participating in PE, School Sport and Extra-Curricular Activities in Leicestershire and Rutland*. Loughborough: Institute of Youth Sport/ Peter Harrison Centre for Disability Sport, Loughborough University.
- Audit Commission (2002) *Special Educational Needs: A Mainstream Issue*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office.
- Barker C (2008) *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. London: Sage.
- Bryman A (2012) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cole B (2005) Mission impossible? Special educational needs, inclusion and the reconceptualization of the role of the SENCO in England and Wales. *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 20 (3): 287–307.
- Cowne E (2005) What do special educational needs coordinators think they do? *British Journal of Learning Support* 20 (2): 61–68.
- Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009) Consultation on Draft Regulations for the Training of Newly Appointed Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) in England. London: DCSF.
- Department for Education (DfE) (1994) *Code of Practice on Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs*. London: DfE.
- Department for Education (DfE) (2010) *The Importance of Teaching: A Schools White Paper*. London: DfE.
- Department for Education (DfE) (2011a) *Review of Vocational Education: The Wolf Report*. London: DfE.
- Department for Education (DfE) (2011b) Support and aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability: A consultation. Available at: www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/sen/a0075339/sengreenpaper (accessed 15 June 2012).
- Department for Education (DfE) (2012) Press release: performance table reform and transparency will raise standards and end perverse incentives. Available at: www.education.gov.uk/a00192510/performance-table-reform-and-transparency-will-raise-standards-and-end-perverse-incentives (accessed 13 June 2012).
- Department of Education and Science (DES) (1978) *Special Educational Needs: A Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office.
- Department of Education and Science (DES) (1981) *The 1981 Education Act*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office.
- Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2001) *Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Pupils with Special Educational Needs*. London: DfES.
- Department for Education and Skills (DfES)/Cabinet Office Regulatory Impact Unit (2004) *Special Educational Needs Consultancy Project: Cutting Red Tape and Bureaucracy*. London: Cabinet Office.
- Dillman D (2007) *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Dillman D, Christenson J, Carpenter, et al. (1974) Increasing mail questionnaire response: A four-state comparison. *American Sociological Review* 39: 744–756.
- Fitzgerald H (2005) Still feeling like a spare piece of luggage? Embodied experiences of (dis)ability in physical education and school sport. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 10(1): 41–59.
- Fitzgerald H, Jobling A and Kirk D (2003a) Valuing the voices of young disabled people: Exploring experience of physical education and sport. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 8(2): 175–200.
- Fitzgerald H, Jobling A and Kirk D (2003b) Listening to the 'voices' of students with severe learning difficulties through a task-based approach to research and learning in physical education. *Support for Learning* 18(3): 123–129.
- Fredrickson N and Cline T (2002) *Special Educational Needs, Inclusion and Diversity: A Textbook*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Hall S (1981) Notes on deconstructing the popular. In: Samuel R (ed) *People's History and Socialist Theory*. London: Routledge, pp.227–239.
- Halliday P (1993) Physical education within special education provision: Equality and entitlement. In: Evans J (ed) *Equality, Education and Physical Education*. London: The Falmer Press, pp.205–217.

- Hoare Q and Smith G (1971) *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Biddles Ltd.
- Kerry T (2005) Towards a typology for conceptualizing the roles of teaching assistants. *Educational Review* 57(3): 373–384.
- Learning and Skills Council (LSC) (2004) LSC School Support Staff Sector Plan for 2004–5 and Beyond. London: LSC.
- Maher A (2010) The inclusion of pupils with special educational needs: The perspective of mainstream secondary school physical education teachers in North-West England. *Sport Science Review* XIX (5–6): 263–283.
- Morley D, Bailey R, Tan J, et al. (2005) Inclusive physical education: Teachers' views of including pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities in physical education. *European Physical Education Review* 11(1): 84–107.
- National Union of Teachers (NUT) (2004) *Special Educational Needs Coordinators and the Revised Code of Practice: A NUT Survey*. London: NUT.
- Neuman W (2011) *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. London: Pearson.
- Saldana J (2009) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. London: Sage.
- Schaefer D and Dillman D (1998) Development of standard email methodology: Results of an experiment. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 62(3): 378–397.
- Silverman D (2011) *Interpreting Qualitative Data*. London: Sage.
- Sissel P and Sheard V (2001) Opening the gates: Reflections on power, hegemony, language and the status quo. In: Sheard V and Sissel P (eds) *Making Space: Merging Theory and Practice in Adult Education*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, pp.3–15.
- Smith A and Green K (2004) Including pupils with special educational needs in secondary school physical education: A sociological analysis of teachers' views. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 25(5): 93–608.
- Stationary Office (2001) *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA)*. London: Stationary Office.
- Szwed C (2007) Remodelling policy and practice: The challenge for staff working with children with special educational needs. *Educational Review* 59(2): 147–160.
- The Education and Skills Committee (2006) *Special Educational Needs – Third Report of Session 2005–2006*. London: The Stationery Office.
- Thomas N and Smith A (2009) *Disability, Sport and Society: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Vickerman P (2007) Training physical education teachers to include children with special educational needs: Perspectives from physical education teacher training providers. *European Physical Education Review* 18(3): 285–402.
- Vickerman P and Blundell M (2012) English learning support assistants' experiences of including children with special educational needs in physical education. *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 27(2): 143–156.
- Weddell K (2004) Points from the SENCO-forum: life as a SENCO. *British Journal of Special Education* 31(3): 105.

Author biographies

Anthony John Maher is a lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire, UK.

Jessica Louise Macbeth is a senior lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire, UK.