

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Negotiating additional learning needs reform in Wales: The voice of the ALNCo

 Alison Murphy¹  | Charlotte Greenway¹  | Carmel Conn² 

¹Faculty of Life Sciences and Education, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Carmarthen, UK

²Faculty of Life Sciences and Education, University of South Wales, Newport, UK

Correspondence

Alison Murphy, Institute of Education, Childhood and Youth, University of Wales Trinity St David, College Road, Carmarthen SA31 3EP, UK.

Email: a.murphy@uwtsd.ac.uk

Abstract

Through a focus on the work of the additional learning needs co-ordinator (ALNCo) and their collaboration with others, this article examines the policy–practice intersection, specifically focusing on inclusive education and practices to support additional learning needs in primary schools in Wales in response to recent educational reform. Our study gathered data from three focus groups of ALNCoS across south Wales, with three participants in each group. Our findings explore ALNCoS' sense of connectedness within the system and the conditions that supported the development of certain educational practices, some of which align with the new policy agenda and others which have their roots in the previous system of supporting children with special educational needs. Four key themes are presented: compliance with mandated practice, non-compliance and resistance to reform, the importance of accountability within local systems, and challenges of the ALNCo role.

KEYWORDS

additional learning needs, ALNCo, policy, reform, Wales

Key points

- This study explored the complex interaction between policy and practice in the area of inclusive education and additional learning needs during a period of educational reform.
- The study found that additional learning needs co-ordinators (ALNCoS) in primary schools in Wales face challenges of increased workload and paperwork, the juggling of different roles, and responsibilities related to the increased accountability of schools.
- Positive aspects of reform included enhanced working with parents through person-centred planning practices, increased visibility of inclusion and additional learning needs for senior leaders, and the development of a wider range of provisions in schools for academic and social support.
- ALNCoS described developing practices that are compliant with the national reform programme, but also described non-compliant practices that were mandated locally and often repurposed from the previous system for special educational needs.

INTRODUCTION**Educational reform in Wales**

There has been a drive to create a distinct education system, which, according to Murphy and Waters-Davies (2022,

p. 14), ‘reflected the Welsh Government's commitments to supporting children's rights through legislation and policy in Wales’. The educational policy context in Wales has recently experienced substantial change, including the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales (CfW) (WG, 2021a) for all school-age learners and a new

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2024 The Author(s). *British Journal of Special Education* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of National Association for Special Educational Needs.

arrangement for learners with additional learning needs (ALN), formerly known as special educational needs (SEN). This programme of reform seeks to reduce the impact of disadvantage and poverty in Wales and support high aspirations for all learners by promoting equitable practice and enhancing flexibility in educational decision-making by schools and teachers (WG, 2020). The programme is seen as progressive (Sinnema et al., 2020) and promotes listening to learners and their families within community engagement and the empowerment of teachers as professionals (WG, 2021a).

The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (2018) established a new integrated statutory framework for children and young people with additional learning needs aged 0 to 25 years. It replaced the previous SEN system and is accompanied by the ALN Code for Wales (WG, 2021b). The rhetoric of equity, inclusion and children's rights seen in the wider education reform programme is echoed in this legislation. For example, the new system promotes a more person-centred approach, involving learners and their families in decision-making processes. This contrasts with the previous system, where decisions were often made with less direct involvement. Statements, individual education plans (IEPs) and learning support plans for post-16 learners are no longer required and have been replaced by individual development plans (IDPs) with a view to reducing the administrative burden. There are new measures for the identification of learners who require additional support, detailing that they should have greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, but also that the learning difficulty or disability requires provision 'additional to or different from' what is ordinarily available in a school (WG, 2021b, pp. 29–30). This signified a change in criteria for identification of need and means that some learners previously identified as having special educational needs, most likely many of those at earlier School Action and School Action Plus stages of support (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004), will not be identified as having additional learning needs. Subsequently, recent research has indicated an overall reduction in the number of learners identified as having ALN, though this reduction has been accompanied by an increase in the number of statutory plans (Estyn, 2023).

Within the legislation, schools have a legal requirement to create and oversee IDPs and teachers must make sure learner needs are established and supported, thus increasing school accountability and making the role of the ALN co-ordinator (ALNCo) crucial. Under the new legislation the strategic focus is significantly different from the previous system. The ALNCo now has a strategic role in developing ALN policy and practice in settings, advising on staffing and resource issues but also having day-to-day responsibility for identifying and monitoring learners with ALN (WG, 2021b). Furthermore, schools are expected to provide a 'graduated response' to

learning support, widening access for learners who need support, but how this relates to the new curriculum and other aspects of reform is unclear. Guidance is lacking on this, and tension exists with regard to the development of high-quality teaching for all learners, delivered through Curriculum for Wales, the policy rhetoric of inclusion, and the focus of the new ALN system on individual deficit (Conn & Davis, 2024). As a result, what inclusive education looks like within local contexts post-ALN reform remains uncertain.

Inclusive education and policy mandates

Ainscow et al. (2020) suggest that inclusion should be seen as a never-ending process of responding to diversity by removing barriers to participation and raising achievement for all. Although emphasis should be placed on those at risk of exclusion and underachievement, there is often conflation of these categories with learners with additional learning needs. Such foci work against those who are marginalised or overlooked and only fuel the debate about whether a fully inclusive education system is achievable. Difficulties also lie in the contradictory conceptions of inclusion, with some policies concentrating on the individual and the school environment and others focusing on accountability and the availability of resources.

Inclusive education is more than a practice that needs to be carried out or some form of differentiated learning for those with additional learning needs. It must be continually worked on and understood in terms of multiple agencies and teachers' beliefs and values (Conn & Murphy, 2022). Teachers and leaders supportive of inclusive education from a social constructivist perspective would argue that a child's development is dependent not only on inherited capacities but also on social relations and resources, which include shared social values, access to the curriculum, discursive practices, material supports, and full and equal participation (Leijen et al., 2021). Teachers cannot simply decide to be inclusive, since their agency for this is contingent on many interacting systems within the educational community (Naraian & Schlessinger, 2021). Inclusive education is just one system among several competing and more powerful systems, including curriculum and assessment, accountability and governance (Norwich, 2023). Understanding the conditions that support inclusive practice, therefore, and how teachers respond to policy directives may help shape future approaches.

Teacher responses to policy directives indicate a complex picture, with responses ranging from accommodating or assimilating directives into current practices to superficial changes or outright rejection (Coburn, 2004). According to Stillman and Anderson (2015), teachers do not always conform to new policy directives, but strategically adapt existing practices to minimise disruption

and help maintain their integrity and professional identities. Research on inclusive education suggests that accommodation is less challenging if teachers and leaders hold positive beliefs about social justice and see inclusive practice as a pathway to this (Woodcock & Hardy, 2017). Similarly, negative prior beliefs and experiences may hinder the implementation of inclusive practices (Fox et al., 2021). The different ways in which inclusive practice is enacted within schools have prompted calls for attention to the interaction of macro-, meso- and micro-levels of activity within education systems, that is, the interaction of national laws and policies with local policies and practices and with lived experience (Hernández-Saca et al., 2023). The ways in which inclusive principles are enacted in local contexts are increasingly seen as crucial to understanding the achievement of inclusion within a system and how its principles can be undermined (Artiles & Kozleski, 2016). The notion of ‘assemblages’ has been applied to inclusive education to describe the entanglement of social, affective, discursive, material and spatial conditions that need to be considered when considering inclusion as an enactment (van de Putte et al., 2018). Assemblages do not refer to individual experiences and actions, but rather to how people feel connected within a field of relations and what signals to them the need to act in particular ways (Davies & Gannon, 2012). Inclusive education as an assemblage draws attention to specific actors, but in terms of their situatedness and the conditions that give rise to certain practices.

Role of the additional learning/special educational needs co-ordinator

We identified the role of the additional learning needs coordinator (ALNCo) as significant in terms of its connections to the field of relations for inclusive education and additional learning needs. Research into the role of the additional learning/special educational needs co-ordinator indicates a range of challenges not just in Wales, but worldwide. According to Lin et al. (2022), managing SEN is evolving as a chosen strategy for refining school systems globally, contributing to the overall performance of schools as well as quality inclusive education. Therefore, strategically the role of the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCo) can be viewed as paramount in supporting the evolution of school policies and practices. The functions of the ALNCo/SENCo are complex and involve, among other things, identifying learners who need support, overseeing resources, guiding and training staff, communicating with external agencies and record keeping. Liasidou and Svensson (2014) report that SENCos are positioned as occupying a leadership role in school, although the nature of this leadership has not been overtly explored. Dobson (2019) describes the SENCo as a middle leader role that links to both enabling the work of others and

getting directly involved in classroom practice. Research by Struyve et al. (2018) suggests that the efficacy of the co-ordinator is often measured by their level of leadership and linked to professional experience and their involvement with various networks.

A significant facet of the role is being seen as an advocate for change practices and facilitating these changes with others, while enduring the competing pressures outlined above. Attending to the needs of learners who require additional support has been labelled as emotional work that involves more highs and lows than classroom practice. Mackenzie (2012) found that learning co-ordinators experienced positive emotions of satisfaction and commitment in their work, but also negative feelings of blame and isolation from colleagues and learners, as well as exhaustion arising from ‘plate spinning’. Specific practices may be particularly important, including practices that support listening, consultation and collaborative thinking (van de Putte et al., 2018). Further research on the experiences of SENCos reports co-ordinators feeling overwhelmed in terms of workload, limited resources, and the need to adopt a range of roles, including that of collaborator, problem solver, arbiter, auditor and manager (Lin et al., 2022; Qureshi, 2014). Tensions in relation to balancing the competing demands of accountability with developing a culture of inclusive values and responsibility provide a further challenge (Smith, 2022).

There is a paucity of research to date on the work of ALNCos in Wales, although Greenway et al. (forthcoming) report on a large-scale survey of ALNCo views, and Estyn (2023), the Welsh inspectorate, has produced a thematic review of the implementation of ALN reform which includes the views of ALNCos. The aim of this project was to contribute to research in this area by examining how ALN practices in primary schools in Wales have developed in response to recent educational reform, specifically focusing on the work of the ALNCo and their collaboration with others, including engagement with learners, teachers, parents, external agencies and local authorities. We also explored the challenges facing ALNCos in the day-to-day enactment of their role in schools.

METHODOLOGY

The research occurred in south-east and south-west Wales in three local authority areas. Ethical approval for the project was sought, and primary data were collected through three in-person focus groups, each comprising three participants. We used a purposive sampling strategy to select participants via ALNCo regional networks, especially seeking those who were interested in the impact of reform on ALN practices.

Within each group, the ALNCos varied in age and experience, though many had been SENCos or ALNCos

for several years. Some ALNCoS were responsible for provision in one school, and others were responsible for several schools within a local cluster. The meetings were held in locations that were convenient for the teachers and lasted between 60 and 90 min. Data were recorded and then transcribed.

Each ALNCo was asked to contribute one or two objects, such as photographs or artefacts, to act as a prompt or support their description of practice and move towards the material situatedness of practice. We were interested in how these professionals negotiated the landscape of practice and connectedness with others and the learning environment. Focus groups were viewed as an opportunity to produce collaborative narratives related to the recent policy developments in Wales. Collective biographies were sought to allow individuals to articulate their experiences alongside others (Davies & Gannon, 2012). These shared experiences were viewed as methodologically advantageous.

Data production and analysis drew on the new materialist social inquiry design featured in Fox and Alldred's (2015) work. We wanted to explore assemblages, that is, what the ALNCoS felt connected to, and their descriptions of possible actions and their feelings concerning practices being developed in primary schools in Wales in response to educational reform.

FINDINGS

We sought to investigate change practices in primary schools in Wales in response to reform of the system for learners who require additional support. In our analysis, we were interested in what ALNCoS felt connected to within the system that prompted specific actions. What emerged from the data was evidence of how school practices were being developed that complied with new statutory arrangements but also resisted them. ALNCoS described the challenges and frustrations they felt within their role and the directions in which they were developing practice within their schools. This section presents the findings under four key themes: compliance with mandated practice, non-compliance and resistance to reform, the strong sense of connectedness ALNCoS felt within local systems, and challenges of the ALNCo role.

Compliance with mandated practice

There was a sense of ALNCoS structuring their role as directed by the new legislation, that is, identifying learners who might have additional needs and planning, monitoring and reviewing support according to processes in the new ALN Code (Welsh Government, 2021b) – for example, spending hours filling out required paperwork, often in their own time at home. Such compliance made some participants feel frustrated and overwhelmed because

they had insufficient time to do everything when their days were filled with meetings and referrals. Almost all participants held several roles alongside that of ALNCo, such as health and well-being leads, prompting two participants to say they felt they had to juggle priorities and ALNCo duties.

Despite the challenges, many participants also shared positive experiences, including having a more strategic overview of their settings and a wider scope in terms of an oversight of all learners in their settings. They felt empowered as part of the senior management team (SMT), where their voices were heard, and ALN was prioritised. Those who were not part of the SMT still had a strategic overview and felt that consultations with headteachers ensured that ALN was visible at management meetings – a significant change from previous years. ALNCoS also spoke of *'the trust and responsibility'* afforded them to lead and act as a conduit between children, parents and staff. This empowerment has led some settings to take action to build capacity by reducing teaching hours or releasing individuals from other roles, a promising development in the face of reform.

The new legislation clarifies that ALN is 'everybody's business' and appears to have boosted ALNCoS' confidence in delegating and asking others to take responsibility for ALN-related tasks. However, participants acknowledged that *'lots of work goes into building trust and confidence in teachers to believe they can take on responsibility for ALN in their classrooms'*. Four participants mentioned that not all teachers see ALN as their responsibility, despite preparation, training and raising awareness of their duty to meet the needs of all learners. The reform programme introduced the idea of universal access to the curriculum and development of responsive pedagogy suited to all learners, but this was thought to be difficult to manage when *'you still get teachers who think ALN isn't anything to do with me'* and *'ALN is the responsibility of ALNCoS'*. Some participants acknowledged the implications of this, feeling unable to ask teachers to carry out programmes (such as maths and language programmes) when teachers are under increasing pressure from competing priorities amid significant curriculum changes. This had led to some ALNCoS holding all ALN responsibilities and being reluctant to hand over the writing of IDPs, though the rationale for this had more to do with legal ramifications and accountability than capacity and capability.

Compliance was indicated by the level of formality ALNCoS sought in their conversations with others. For example, six participants described how they could only move slowly through their school because of being approached by staff with concerns about children. This type of informal communication caused frustration for some, with reminders to staff to follow the formal processes for reporting and monitoring. All participants wanted to be approachable and hold an 'open door' policy. Still, many qualified this in terms of the accountability of their role

and wanting to create an official record of their work. Three participants commented that their ALNCo role impacted on the way in which they experienced social relations with colleagues, some of whom sought them out, while others avoided them. One participant described it in this way:

I will walk down the corridor, and then some teachers see me. Some teachers want to see me, whereas others don't. I'm asking about how this child is getting on and so on. That's another element where it's great that teachers want to see you, but then when they see you coming, and they know you're going to see them for a specific reason, that's quite difficult.

(participant 2, focus group 2)

A key mandated practice described was person-centred planning (PCP) meetings with parents, teachers and sometimes children. Participants described PCP meetings as a way of monitoring the efficacy of provision while providing opportunities for listening and acknowledging positive aspects of a child's life and experiences and the challenges they were facing. All participants expressed strong satisfaction with PCP, many describing it as aligning home and school priorities for a child and mapping a constructive way forward, especially with parents.

Non-compliance with policy mandates and resistance to reform

Seven of the nine participants noted that the person-centred planning required by the new ALN system was well developed and embedded in the school and local authority. These participants highlighted this as evidence that the reform was *'not a big change'* and that much of what was being developed in schools was essentially a re-purposing of the old SEN system into the new ALN system. All participants said they had oversight of all learners in their setting and took steps to get to know any child who might require extra support, whether or not they potentially met the criteria for ALN. Unofficial categories of concern were operating for children who may require different levels of support, and PCP meetings could be held for these children. In some settings (mentioned by four ALNCoS), children were categorised as *'one-page profile learners'*, *'enhanced one-page profile learners'* or *'learners with individual education plans'* (IDPs, as outlined in statutory mandates).

The ALN system appeared to be used for wider accountability and to ensure all children were *'kept on track'* and making progress. One participant explained that this was because *'children are paramount'* in her local authority and that there was strong local support

for resistance to the narrower focus of ALN. The attainment of all learners within a school was viewed as the priority, and ALN systems were described as the most useful for achieving this. Teachers were encouraged to compile individual targets for learners from a bank of targets to create a *'mini IDP'* for a range of non-ALN learners. One ALNCo said that her school had experimented with using one-page profiles for all children but had found it too difficult to manage. She and others described dealing with large numbers of non-ALN learners with a one-page profile, sometimes half the children in a class.

In this respect, it was apparent that policy mandates were not being followed and that a degree of resistance to change in the previous system was needed. Five participants noted that the new categories of support they had introduced were deliberately overlaid on the categories of School Action, School Action Plus and Statement, which operated under the old SEN system. One participant rationalised this as *'needing to control the narrative'* of policy mandates, which were seen as not adequately encompassing all the children in a setting who required extra support and for whom the school was accountable. As one participant put it:

We need to control the narrative because we know where we are; the children are still being provided for. It's just the information is shared in a different way. So, I think it's about reminding people that it's not just the ALN or the SEN register as it was; we still have our monitoring lists, and we're still sharing information about those people who have universal provision needs.

(participant 3, focus group 3)

Strong sense of connectedness to local systems

Authorisation of the role of the ALNCo was evident in the connections participants experienced with leaders and teachers within their schools. This was characterised by multiple network connections, which participants said they needed to carry out their roles. As one participant put it, an ALNCo should not operate as a *'lone wolf'* since the role fundamentally involves developing trusting relationships with others for effective working. The supportive leader featured critically in these discussions; participants across the three focus groups commented that they could only carry out their role because their heads listened to their concerns, had increased capacity by providing extra staff and resources and essentially *'has got my back'*, as one participant described it.

Local authorities and ALNCo network groups were also places where participants sought advice. Participants

described how their local authorities disseminated the required information and *'there's always someone available at the end of an e-mail, a Teams message'*. Participants praised the supportive nature of the ALNCo network systems, and ALN champions developed as part of the reform programme. These connections were seen as invaluable, providing a safe place where they were free to discuss issues, share ideas and reflect to ensure their practice aligned with practice elsewhere. One participant noted that practices that were developed in these regional networks ultimately determined practice in her setting for learners:

There is a lot of work that goes into building teachers' ability to problem-solve themselves. We in schools and the local authority provide lots of methods to support that and advocate that as much as possible. We use the barriers to learning matrix, which has been shared with all the schools in the local authority in terms of helping schools identify if pupils have ALN and the additional provisions required. Any staff can have access to that because it will give resources and support strategies for particular needs. We promote it as a list of resources to refer to and ensure that there is that graduated response in terms of the support and often before they come to us.

(participant 2, focus group 1)

Good connections with parents were described as vital and facilitated by the PCP meeting. This was seen as an effective way of listening to children, particularly parents, so that issues did not cause conflict. In one focus group, ALNCoS said the introduction of home visits and conversations with local nurseries, health visitors or speech and language therapists before children start school supported the development of positive relationships with parents and children early on. One participant spoke of being *'forearmed'* and the importance of building confidence in parents so they can approach ALNCoS when they need advice or guidance. Similarly, initial informal meetings to explain the ALN processes and changes to provision were highlighted as paramount for developing successful relationships with parents.

There was a sense of a new way of working and connectedness with parents beyond the school gates, which was evident in the ways participants spoke about the development of parent groups, family support groups and disability support groups. One ALNCo said her school had become a *'one-stop shop'* for services, and others noted that the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic had given impetus to this trend. The pandemic was described as exacerbating disadvantage and the need for services such as food banks and clothes banks, while strengthening community links and changing schools' cultural

practices. Schools were described as expanding what they offered to learners in terms of support. Four ALNCoS saw themselves as taking over from external services, partly because of austerity cutbacks but also because of development in their own knowledge and skill. Some participants felt a reduced need to call on external agencies and described a range of in-house support services.

A sense of connectedness was described in relation to new spaces that were being opened in schools. ALNCoS saw part of their role as transforming spaces into quiet, nurturing environments, particularly for learners needing mental health and well-being support. An increasing need for such spaces was described, but participants also noted that the appropriation of spaces within the school had an impact in terms of recognition of the importance of academic and social-emotional support. However, not all participants experienced positive connections to spaces. Some felt disconnected because they had no permanent base. For example, one ALNCo spoke of the issues in the following way:

I just carry my computer around the place; I don't really have anywhere to go, which is not nice. You need files ... I've got a little cubby hole in the well-being room, and I don't like to go in there when there's some sort of music therapy or whatever, so it's a lot of frustration. The library doubles as an intervention room but a dumping ground as well.

(participant 2, focus group 2)

This situation caused much frustration, as she was often *'being pulled into things or distracted'*, resulting in organising PCP meetings and completing paperwork outside school hours.

Challenges of the ALNCo role

The ALNCo role was described as *'putting out fires'* and being *'pulled and pushed'* by sudden crises. There was a sense of danger and risk expressed in participants' accounts, though also satisfaction in dealing with difficult issues. Challenges of the ALNCo role were evident in descriptions of *'shoe-horning things whilst I've got the time out of class'*, *'conducting back-to-back PCP meetings'* and *'not taking lunch or coffee breaks because you just keep working'*. Concerns were also raised about how being part of the SMT impacted on informal interactions with colleagues, resulting in social isolation.

Although participants felt a renewed sense of connectedness with parents, some felt that parents were becoming the priority, to the detriment of time spent with the children. Across all settings, much of the increased time with parents was spent reassuring them that their child was receiving support despite not being

on the ALN register. Parent anxieties relating to this have been exacerbated by external agencies' lack of understanding of the new system. One of the ALNCo described frustrations in dealing with the confusion caused by the mixed messages and incorrect advice parents often receive from those who do not understand the changes to provision:

The biggest challenges are everybody else's and the professional's understanding of the changes. So, you've got paediatricians who are meeting with parents ... saying my child is struggling. Then you get a letter from a paediatrician to say, can you please put support in place ... but it's already under our universal provision, but they don't quite understand. We've had the same with another agency that works closely with parents. Questioning why the child doesn't have an IDP, for instance, but they're not an IDP child. I find that quite frustrating.

(participant 1, focus group 3)

However, this ALNCo did acknowledge that the briefings and preparations for the new system focused on school staff and not external agencies.

DISCUSSION

Findings suggest that the ALNCo role is a pressured one in terms of dealing with sudden crises and mediating between groups of teachers, learners and parents, but also in terms of completing paperwork and time pressures. This is consistent with a UK-wide survey of SENCoS that reported a large majority concerned about the pressures of the role, including completing administrative duties, organising multi-agency work, and spending increasing amounts of time with parents (NASUWT, 2018). Mixed emotions about the role, in terms of stress, being overworked and feeling isolated from colleagues within the school, but also satisfaction and personal commitment, have been reported elsewhere. In their case studies of primary schools in New Zealand, Lin et al. (2022) found that the emotions SENCoS rated most highly were 'passion', 'physically and emotionally demanding' and 'isolation', while Mackenzie (2012) found that strong emotions, both positive and negative, were a feature of SENCo work in England.

Inclusive practice and support for learning were described as essentially social processes, contingent on a network of meaningful and trusted relationships with colleagues, leaders, learners and parents (Brennan & King, 2022). ALNCoS described their role as that of a middle-level leader (Girelli et al., 2019), that is, implementing policy through the work of others and influencing teachers' mindsets, but authorised and supported to

do this by senior leaders. Important activities included suggesting classroom-based strategies for support and helping build class teacher confidence to work with a widening group of learners (Struyve et al., 2018), but also engaging in authentic dialogue with all parties to support a sense of shared responsibility and planning (Girelli et al., 2019). Similar to van de Putte et al. (2018), ALNCoS felt they needed to be approachable and should 'think together' with others to find solutions to problems of learning and emotional support. PCP meetings were described as central to this, with wholly positive opinions about the effectiveness of this reflecting studies elsewhere (Gray & Woods, 2022).

The importance of network connections suggests that local accountability operated for ALNCoS more powerfully than adherence to macro-level policies. The way in which the ALN system is being developed – with larger numbers of learners coming under the ALNCo brief and a range of non-statutory categories of need being developed – is not in line with the ALN Code for Wales but is strongly aligned with regional arrangements and the accountability of the school for the achievement of all learners. ALNCo regional networks, or cluster groups, were influential in this project and signposted by Estyn (2023) as being significant in supporting schools to develop their practices for ALN and learning support more generally. The re-purposing of the older system for SEN has also been found in England (Boesley & Crane, 2018) and may explain schools' confidence in operating the new ALN system, despite its deviation from mandated practice (Estyn, 2023). There have been changes, notably the increased workload/paperwork coupled with a greater sense of accountability for schools. The inclusion of the ALNCo in SMTs has led to the ALNCo being more visible, but there is much that seems to be a continuation of existing practices, including the categorisations of learners.

The inclusivity of classroom practices being introduced and new spaces being developed in schools by all staff was evident. It appears to be the case that class teachers are being held more accountable under the new system and children were described as being withdrawn less often for support. However, research into the identification of SEN/ALN in Wales indicates extensive over-identification of learners, with nearly half of learners born in 2002/2003 identified as having SEN/ALN during their education from Reception to Year 11 (Knight et al., 2024). This suggests that the pathologising of learners is endemic within the system in Wales and alerts us to the fact that recent developments in practice may not be aligned with inclusive principles. In this research, some ALNCoS did talk of 'weaker' learners and of the creation of 'alternative provision' within the mainstream school, suggesting a belief in the intrinsic difference of some learners. We are reminded that the role of the ALNCo essentially stands between special education and inclusive education,

as Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) point out, and that there is a danger of perpetuation of a dual system of special and mainstream education rather than inclusive environments that meet the needs of all learners. Therefore, we recommend further research into the implementation of practice in schools, and critical reflection by practitioners on the principles underpinning their practice.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research was funded by the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and the University of South Wales.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The dataset for this project is not available via open access.

ETHICAL APPROVAL STATEMENT

Ethical approval was gained from University of Wales Trinity St David ethics committee.

ORCID

Alison Murphy  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4020-8896>

Charlotte Greenway  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5433-9777>

Carmel Conn  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4395-8302>

REFERENCES

- Ainscow, M., Chapman, C. & Hadfield, M. (2020) *Changing education systems: a research-based approach*. London: Routledge.
- Artiles, A.J. & Kozleski, E.B. (2016) Inclusive education's promises and trajectories: critical notes about future research on a venerable idea. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 24(43), 1–29.
- Boesley, L. & Crane, L. (2018) 'Forget the health and care and just call them education plans': SENCOs' perspectives on education, health and care plans. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 18(1), 36–47.
- Brennan, A. & King, F. (2022) Teachers' experience of transformative professional learning to narrow the values practice gap related to inclusive practice. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 52(2), 175–193.
- Coburn, C.E. (2004) Beyond decoupling: rethinking the relationship between the institutional environment and the classroom. *Sociology of Education*, 77(3), 211–244.
- Conn, C. & Davis, S. (2024) Policy implications of collective agency for inclusion: evidence from the Welsh context. *Journal of Education Policy*, 39(1), 127–148.
- Conn, C. & Murphy, A. (2022) Introduction: inclusive pedagogy as an ethics of responsibility and care. In: Murphy, A. & Conn, C. (Eds.) *Inclusive pedagogies for early childhood education*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 1–9.
- Davies, B. & Gannon, S. (2012) Collective biography and the entangled enlivening of being. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 5(4), 357–376.
- Dobson, G.J. (2019) Understanding the SENCO workforce: re-examination of selected studies through the lens of an accurate national dataset. *British Journal of Special Education*, 46(4), 445–464.
- Estyn. (2023) The new Additional Learning Needs system: progress of schools and local authorities in supporting pupils with additional learning needs. Available from: <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/thematic-report/new-additional-learning-needs-system> [Accessed 4th June 2024].
- Fitzgerald, J. & Radford, J. (2017) The SENCO role in post-primary schools in Ireland: victims or agents of change? *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 32(3), 452–466.
- Fox, N.J. & Alldred, P. (2015) New materialist social inquiry: designs, methods and the research-assemblage. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18(4), 399–414.
- Fox, R.A., Sharma, U., Leif, E.S., Stocker, K.L. & Moore, D.W. (2021) 'Not enough time': identifying Victorian teachers' perceptions of the facilitators and barriers to supporting improved student behaviour. *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education*, 45(2), 1–16.
- Girelli, C., Bevilacqua, A. & Acquaro, D. (2019) Spotlight on the special education needs coordinator (SENCO): why are SENCOs indispensable in today's schools and how to support their middle level leadership. *ISEA*, 47(3), 88–106.
- Gray, A. & Woods, K. (2022) Person-centred practices in education: a systematic review of research. *Support for Learning*, 37(2), 309–335.
- Greenway, C., Conn, C., Knight, C., Thomas, D.V. & Formby, L. (forthcoming) Exploring classroom grouping practices in Wales. *Wales Journal of Education*.
- Hernández-Saca, D.I., Voulgarides, C.K. & Etscheidt, S.L. (2023) A critical systematic literature review of global inclusive education using an affective, intersectional, discursive, emotive and material lens. *Education Sciences*, 13(12), 1212.
- Knight, C., Lowthian, E., Crick, T., Jones, C., Rees, S., Rawlings, A. et al. (2024) *Quantifying the impact of additional learning needs identification in Wales*. Final Report. Nuffield Foundation.
- Leijen, Á., Arcidiacono, F. & Baucal, A. (2021) The dilemma of inclusive education: inclusion for some or inclusion for all. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 633066. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.633066>
- Liasidou, A. & Svensson, C. (2014) Educating leaders for social justice: the case of special educational needs co-ordinators. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 18(8), 783–797.
- Lin, H., Hill, M. & Grudoff, L. (2022) Constructing special educational needs coordinators' identities through emotions. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 48(1), 89–101.
- Mackenzie, S. (2012) 'It's been a bit of a rollercoaster': special educational needs, emotional labour and emotion work. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16(10), 1067–1082.
- Murphy, A. & Waters-Davies, J. (2022) The children's rights approach to early childhood education: policy and context in Wales. In: Murphy, A. & Conn, C. (Eds.) *Inclusive pedagogies for early childhood education*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 13–28.
- Naraian, S. & Schlessinger, S.L. (2021) *Narratives of inclusive teaching: stories of becoming in the field*. New York: Peter Lang.
- NASUWT (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers). (2018) Special Educational Needs (SEN), Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and Additional Support Needs (ASN). Available from: <https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/static/uploaded/843fe4e0-fb73-408f-b2d69e1c48a95dfe.pdf> [Accessed 9th June 2024].
- Norwich, B. (2023) Accountability. *SEN policy research forum*, policy paper 48. Available from: <https://senpolicyresearchforum.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Framework-policy-paper-June-23.pdf> [Accessed 9th May 2024].
- Qureshi, S. (2014) Herding cats or getting heard: the SENCO-teacher dynamic and its impact on teachers' classroom practice. *Support for Learning*, 29(3), 217–229.
- Sinnema, C., Nieveen, N. & Priestley, M. (2020) Successful futures, successful curriculum: what can Wales learn from international curriculum reforms? *Curriculum Journal*, 31(2), 181–201.
- Smith, A. (2022) The experiences of new primary school special educational needs coordinators: presenting the SENCO voice through concept-drawing and personal narratives. *Support for Learning*, 37(1), 91–107.

- Stillman, J. & Anderson, L. (2015) From accommodation to appropriation: teaching, identity, and authorship in a tightly coupled policy context. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(6), 720–744.
- Struyve, C., Hannes, K., Meredith, C., Vandecandelaere, M., Gielen, S. & De Fraine, B. (2018) Teacher leadership in practice: mapping the negotiation of the position of the special educational needs coordinator in schools. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 62(5), 701–718.
- van de Putte, I., de Schauwer, E., van Hove, G. & Davies, B. (2018) Rethinking agency as an assemblage from change management to collaborative work. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22(8), 885–901.
- Welsh Assembly Government. (2004) Special educational needs code of practice for Wales. Available from: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/special-educational-needs-code-of-practice-for-wales.pdf> [Accessed 10th June 2024].
- WG (Welsh Government). (2020) Education in Wales – our national mission: update October 2020. Available from: <https://www.gov.wales/education-wales-our-national-mission-update-october-2020-html> [Accessed 10th June 2024].
- WG (Welsh Government). (2021a) Curriculum for Wales. Available from: <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales> [Accessed 10th June 2024].
- WG (Welsh Government). (2021b) The Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales 2021. Available from: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-06/220622-the-additional-learning-needs-code-for-wales-2021.pdf> [Accessed 10th June 2024].
- Woodcock, S. & Hardy, I. (2017) Beyond the binary: rethinking teachers' understandings of and engagement with inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21(6), 667–686.

How to cite this article: Murphy, A., Greenway, C. & Conn, C. (2024) Negotiating additional learning needs reform in Wales: The voice of the ALNCo. *British Journal of Special Education*, 00, 1–9. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12568>