**Ten years on: to what extent has the 2015 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice influenced professionals' practice within post-16 education?**

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**Ten years on: to what extent has the 2015 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice influenced professionals’ practice within post-16 education?**

This paper explores the influence the 2015 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (CoP) has had on professionals working within post-16 education. The study was empirically grounded and qualitative in methodological orientation. Eighteen participants from an English special education college took part in the study [n=18]. The study has found that barriers to implementation of the SEND guidance continue to exist. Recurring themes relate to a lack of training, time, funding and responsibility held by professionals. There also continues to be a lack of evidence of the graduated approach being applied to practice. However, findings do suggest that some professionals have begun to recognise the positive influence of the SEND CoP and have altered their practice accordingly, placing the learner needs at the centre. The authors conclude that there is currently a gap between policy and practice. Thus, education professionals cannot successfully apply the guidance within the SEND policy to their practice until the adequate special educational support is put in place. The authors argue that more must be done to unite both policy and practice together in the interest of young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

Keywords: special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); code of practice; post-16 education; professional practice

**Introduction**

This paper explores the following question - to what extent has the 2015 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (CoP) influenced professionals’ practice working within post-16 education? The year of 2024 signifies the tenth-year anniversary of the initial implementation of the SEND reforms within England, which were originally implemented in 2014, but following a few revisions and additions the document was reintroduced in 2015.

The SEND reforms were introduced as guidance to inform the support of children and young people with additional needs from birth to 25 years of age. The SEND CoP is underpinned by the Children and Families Act (2014). Part 3 of the Act summarises the legislation that is relevant to children and young people with SEND. The term ‘SEND’ refers to individuals with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities. Within the Code of Practice 2015 an individual with SEND is defined as ‘a child or young person has SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for them’ (DfE & DoH, 2015, pp.15-16).

The SEND CoP brought about the change from a Statement to an Educational Health and Care (EHC) plan. The primary aim of the reform is to focus on improved outcomes for young people with SEND, with a particular focus on the young person working towards outcomes around ‘independence’ and ‘employment’ (Hodkinson and Burch, 2019). Extending the age of provision from birth to 25 years of age has created increasing pressures on post-16 education. Therefore, the SEND CoP now has more impact on post-16 education. It also partly explains why post-16 education did not engage with the previous SEN CoP. A key focus is now placed on provision being more aspirational and person-centred, with the young person and their family involved in all decisions made (DfE and DoH, 2015). As well as this, the SEND CoP emphasises the importance of educational professionals adopting a ‘graduated approach’ to teaching and supporting. A graduated approach is defined within the Code of Practice 2015 as ‘a model of action and intervention in early education settings, schools and colleges to help children and young people who have special educational needs (DfE & DoH, 2015, pp.280).

**The 2015 SEND CoP: policy origin and implications**

The implementation of the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) 2015 guidance was welcomed by the then Coalition Government, as ‘the biggest transformation to SEND support for thirty years’ (DfE and DoH, 2015). The reforms have caused a variety of substantial changes in public attitudes towards SEND provision and the diverse practices that outline that provision. At the same time, such policy changes have created much uncertainty around practitioners’ job roles (Greenwood and Kelly, 2017), as increased accountability is now placed on all professionals who work with young people within educational institutions, particularly teachers. This is reinforced by Carter (2015), who highlights how the legislation emphasises the accountability of all teachers delivering good quality teaching for every young person irrespective of their additional need, as well as also stressing the significance that is now placed on SEND training for all pre-service educators. This is because it is stated within the SEND CoP that 'teachers are responsible and accountable for the progress and development of the pupils in their class, even where pupils access support from teaching assistants or specialist staff' (DfE and DoH, 2015, p. 99).

For teachers, the greatest difference is that they are specifically and explicitly given the fundamental accountability of the development and welfare of every young person in their care, with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) assuming a more leadership position (Hellawell, 2018). This highlights the need for a change in approach from teachers towards learners with an identified SEND. It also indicates a conflicting perspective from previous changes in practice, as previous changes have instead served to demote responsibilities for SEND, which have allowed opportunities for teachers to deem learners with SEND as someone else’s responsibility (Cole, 2003). This suggests that learners with an identified SEND have spent more time with other educational professionals such as Learning Support Workers (LSW) as opposed to the class teacher. Hodkinson and Burch (2019, p.165) highlight how ‘support in some instances actually leads to less direct support from the classroom teacher’. It seems that learners with an identified SEND have not always received the adequate education that is adapted to meet their learning needs. However, Ekins et al. (2016) state that society has increasingly moved on from a time in which practice situated SEND as different from ‘normal’ teaching. Instead, policy rhetoric, such as the SEND CoP, proposes that a key emphasis needs to be placed on inclusive teaching, with amplified responsibility for SEND situated on the class tutor as opposed to laying solely with specialist SEND tutors, the SENCO or even LSW’s.

Despite the push for more inclusivity for learners with an identified SEND within the current SEND CoP, Hellawell (2019) suggests that the legislation has negatively impacted educational professionals. Accordingly, she contends from her research that:

The 2015 SEND CoP has unsurprisingly generated some anxiety and insecurity around ‘not knowing’ enough and ‘maybe getting it wrong’ in the processes of embedding new demands into existing structures and practices, and individuals are therefore anxious to know whether ‘they do enough’… [as] …new demands placed on various partners is underwritten by the ‘legitimate expectation’ that individuals should be ‘as good as they can be’ in order to facilitate effective practice (pp.177-178).

Alternatively, Crane et al (2021) stated that the SEND CoP was reported as having a positive influence on professionals. For instance, Curran, Mortimore and Riddell (2017) found from their research that educational professionals were becoming more ‘accountable’ since the introduction of SEND CoP, and as a result, in many cases, now taking ownership of the learning of all students. Similarly, Sales and Vincent (2018) discovered how SENCOs felt that the introduction of EHC plans had provided an improved procedure for assessment, planning and outcomes, as well as significantly more parents/carers and student engagement. Hellawell (2017) suggests that this has led to educational professionals appreciating the person-centred approach that is promoted through the graduated approach, as highlighted within the SEND CoP.

However, it is questionable as to whether professionals have complete understanding on exactly what it means to adopt a ‘graduated approach’ to teaching and supporting. The graduated approach focuses on identifying and supporting learners with SEND, it consists of a four-part cycle of action; assess, plan, do and review (DfE and DoH, 2015). It aims to remove obstacles to learning and ensure support is in place in all aspects of a learner’s journey, so that each learner can reach attainable outcomes, regardless of their level of need. Belli’s (2021) research into SEND provision suggests that many educational institutions did not appear to demonstrate a precise graduated approach to provision, often because a reinforced cycle of ‘Assess, Plan, Do, Review’ for intervention had not been put in place. This consequently means the needs of some learners not being identified soon enough and hence intervention being delayed, and in some cases not taking place at all. Therefore, this results in learners with an identified SEND not receiving the provision that they require to achieve and in the long-term attain their outcomes relating to employment, thus highlighting the importance of a graduated approach being applied.

**Methodology**

The study was empirically grounded and qualitative in methodological orientation. The qualitative data was collected from a questionnaire survey and follow-up interviews between 2022 and 2023. Eighteen participants from an English college took part in the study [n=18]. All participants were employees of a post-16 college in the North West of England, but their occupation differed. Out of the 18 participants that took part in the research the most common occupation was a tutor.

Ethical approval for the study was considered and granted by a university research committee. As part of the anonymous questionnaire survey, participants were provided with an information sheet and given the option to withdraw their consent after the data collection. This was achieved by asking participants to give a four-digit code in the survey. If a participant wished to withdraw from the study, the four-digit code would be used to locate and remove their response. All data were anonymised and securely stored for the duration of the research project. In addition, at the end of the online survey, all participants were invited to participate in a follow-up interview. Six participants agreed to participate in the follow-up interview.

The qualitative narrative data for this study were analysed inductively using a thematic approach with a particular concern to voice the participants’ perspectives in their response to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2022). For the data analysis, we went through the following steps – immersion, reflecting, taking apart data, recombining data, relating and locating one’s data, reflecting back and presenting the data (Wellington, 2015). During the process, we immersed ourselves in the data by re-reading participants’ responses to the questionnaire and interviews. As a continuous iterative process of analysis our concerns included the imperative to ensure a rigorous process of conclusion drawing and to have due regard for the context in which the data was generated. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, each participant’s identity is coded in the report of the findings. Characteristics of each of the participants quoted in this paper are shown in Table 1.

<Insert Table 1 here>

Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to code and group the data into themes, and researchers’ interpretations were validated through comparison of independent readings. In essence, this was a three-stage process: firstly reading and re-reading of survey data (numerical scores and free text responses) and focus group interview transcripts to achieve familiarisation and immersion in the data and produce notes and observations of these data as a prelude to establishing patterns and themes; secondly, a more analytical coding to generate the building blocks for construction of themes, that is the meanings that could be built; and thirdly, examining the codes and coded data to construct provisional themes. All the authors were actively involved in the data analysis process - immersion of data, the analytical and interpretative process, and the writing of the analysis. The following main themes emerged from the analysis - the positive impact of the SEND CoP; barriers preventing professionals from being able to effectively engage with the SEND CoP guidance; funding and the impact on resources; and Educational Health Care Plans. These themes are explored in relation to literature, with key learning points or ‘lessons’ extracted.

**Findings**

***The positive impact of the SEND CoP***

Despite the barriers that professionals feel continue to prevent them from being able to effectively engage with the guidance, many professionals express that the SEND CoP has had a positive impact upon their practice. One participant shared the impact the SEND CoP had on her practice and outlook when teaching a student with SEND:

‘I just think it's taught me things like, this particular learner, who I was really struggling to teach, because of constant interruptions. There was almost like a battle of wills going on. It made me realise that I needed to change. He wasn't being wilful; he wasn't being naughty; he wasn't any of those things. He was just being, and I needed to change my approach. I think I got that from the code of practice…I need to change my practice’ (Participant 1911, tutor).

Likewise, another tutor also expressed that the SEND CoP had a positive impact on her practice and recognised the importance of adapting practice, as when asked if the guidance had affected her roles and responsibilities as a tutor she responded with the following:

Definitely…I am redesigning constantly. I'm considering factors. I'm sorting

information from the experts… It's making me think more and that's got to

be a positive impact’ (Participant 2502, tutor).

This highlights the positive influence the SEND CoP has had on educational professionals, as it has emphasised the importance of adapting practice to meet the needs of learners.

Similarly, all participants deemed that the SEND CoP had enabled them to improve their practice as a professional. When participants were asked to explain how they felt the SEND CoP had enabled their role to grow, responses were typically positive. Participants proposed that the guidance had provided them with a clearer picture of the provision that they should be providing, a deeper understanding of the importance of learners reaching their EHC plan outcomes, and awareness of how to break down the barriers that learners my face in their education (Participant 2502 tutor, Participant 0504, and Participant 3010, manager). One participant emphasised how they felt more able to help learners with specific needs, however, also took the opportunity to highlight how more training was still required (Participant 2004, tutor). Therefore, despite the positive impact professionals feel the SEND guidance has had on their practice the desire for more training is highlighted.

***Barriers preventing professionals from being able to effectively engage with the SEND CoP guidance***

The data collected illustrates that there are still barriers in place that are preventing professionals from being able to fully engage with the SEND CoP. A lack of effective training appears to be a recurring theme throughout the data collected and is a barrier to implementation for some educational professionals. This reflects a mixed picture, as evidently some professionals do feel as if they are receiving the right amount of training, whereas others expressed that more training is required. Some participants displayed the need for more training based upon a lack of understanding of how their role fits into the graduated approach. Two participants stated that the graduated approach was not relevant to them, despite these participants earlier stating that they understand and apply the graduated approach to their practice. This highlights a contradiction of results and suggests that not all participants have either understood the question or provided accurate responses. The two participants who stated that the graduated approach was not relevant to them, held the occupation of either a tutor or LSW/CSW, hence work directly with learners with SEND and have a fundamental role in implementing support. This suggests that not all participants engage with the SEND CoP and consequently understand how their role fits into the graduated approach of teaching and supporting. This was highlighted by a manager, who stated that:

‘clarification is needed for individuals to see how their role fits into the graduated approach’ (Participant 3010, manager).

As well as this, during an interview with a tutor it was implied that a graduated approach is not being adopted by all, as it was suggested that some practitioners are applying it to their practice whilst others are not (Participant 2606, tutor). This proposes that not all participants may feel that the SEND CoP is relevant to them and therefore cannot recognise how their role fits into the graduated approach.

This mixed response was further illustrated when examining data collected from the interviews, as when participants were asked if they had been asked to refer to the guidance, responses included: ‘Yes, in CPD training. They have mentioned that we should have a look at the guidance’ (Participant 2606, tutor). Alternatively, other responses included: ‘No…I've never been asked to refer to it. Just something that I think is a really good document’ (Participant 1911, tutor).

This implies that staff who have referred to the guidance have done so due to their own professional development. Similarly, another participant indicated that the SEND CoP had influenced her practice due to her own continuous professional development (CPD) that she had undertaken, which had enabled her to become more aware of her learners and their support needs (Participant 0504, tutor). This suggests that if the appropriate training is given the SEND CoP can have a positive influence on professionals practice.

Results from the data suggest that a lack of in-house training could be due to a shortage of time available to staff. As suggested by a LSW/CSW:

‘The SEND code of practice may be mentioned once a year, however there is never enough time to sit and actually go through it’ (Participant 9648, LSW/ CSW)

The need for an increase in CPD to employ the SEND CoP was communicated by all participants that had also highlighted the need for more time to understand and implement the guidance within their practice. This presents a question as to why not all participants feel as if they are receiving the right amount of training or time to implement the SEND CoP into their practice, thus suggesting that some practitioners recognise the importance of the SEND CoP more than others. This notion is proposed by a tutor who states that it is in fact the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) who undervalue the SEND CoP.

‘There's been no training on the send code of practice at all, as far as I'm aware, in the last five years. Again, I think that's because there's no one to do it. There's no one that maybe really understands it. There's no senior leadership that perhaps sees the importance of it because it's not under your nose all the time, is it?’ (Participant 1911, tutor)

One participant implied that the training that had been provided from a member of SLT had issues around the quality and accessibility:

‘A PowerPoint with a lot of ballpoints and saying this is the legislation is not training… Just sitting there and being spoken to does not work…I've had training in here… and the presentation wasn't even in slides or view, because it wasn't prepared properly… It's got to be accessible for tutors as well…But again, I know her time [member of SLT] is restricted. If they are experts, it is difficult.’ (Participant 2502, tutor)

This suggests that the importance of the SEND CoP is perhaps undervalued and not considered a priority by members of SLT.

As well as strong support from SLT, level of communication and support from the local authority (LA) were highlighted as issues from participants.

‘We are not working as a team collaboratively in the communication side of things. It’s all down to, “I haven’t got admin time for that one.” (Participant 2502, tutor)

Thus, it is implied that a lack of communication is the result of practitioners not having enough time to use the appropriate systems to communicate. This recurring theme of ‘time’ was expressed during interviews with participants, and it appeared to be a noteworthy challenge for practitioners. Within the SEND CoP, the importance of information sharing amongst all individuals involved with a learner is key, to ensure that the interventions that have been implemented for that learner can be assessed and reviewed. However, if professionals are not being equipped with adequate time to communicate their learners needs then a significant element of the SEND CoP guidance cannot be followed. As well as this, lack of support provided by the LA was voiced by the SEND Manager, who expressed that there was lack of understanding for colleges of a smaller size (Participant 3010, manager). This highlights another barrier faced by post-16 colleges, especially those of a smaller size. However, the SEND Manager did acknowledge that more training has been provided by the LA since the SEND inspection in 2019 (Participant 3010, manager). This implies that SEND training was not a priority prior to the SEND inspection, regardless of the introduction of the SEND reforms in 2015.

***Funding and the impact on resources***

One matter brought to the forefront was the need for more funding within the college. A strong theme that occurred throughout the data collected was that a lack of funding was preventing the guidance within the SEND CoP from being embedded within practice. In three of the interviews this was a topic of much discussion. One tutor expressed that a lack of funding is one of the primary reasons why professionals cannot integrate the SEND CoP into their teaching:

‘The college does not have money for resources to enable us to fully include the SEND Code of Practice into our teaching’ (Participant 1911, tutor).

Similarly, a member of the LSW/CSW team stated that:

‘Not enough funding is available to ensure that we meet the learners with an identified SEND’ needs’ (Participant 2842, LSW/CSW).

Consequently, a lack of funding appears to not only have had an impact on incorporating the SEND CoP into teaching and supporting, but also on the resources available to students both within and outside the classroom. This is illustrated by the following extracts:

‘In our college we would benefit from a sensory room but we have no funding to provide this’ (Participant 2842, LSW/CSW)

Similarly, a member of the wider college staff stated that:

‘There appears to be limited resources available to students, no focus on what may be available in light of advances in technology’ (Participant 2406, other).

Other participants highlighted the need for learners to have their own area within the college to enable them to socialise. It was suggested that this would encourage learners to practice their communication and social interaction skills outside of the classroom. This would, in turn, enable learners to work towards EHC plan outcomes specified around communication and social interaction skills, an area of development that is deemed as essential within the SEND CoP. However, although it is fundamental that colleges can offer integrated spaces for learners with SEND, such notions point to a potential risk of ghettoization within the college estate. It is implied by participants that learners with SEND need a separate area within the college to socialise, suggesting that such learners are not capable of socialising under normal means.

In addition, there appeared to be a strong agreement amongst participants that the resources available were not appropriate in effectively supporting learners with SEND. When participants were asked on the reasoning behind this, or what they felt was needed to improve resources, ‘funding’ appeared to be a strong theme that was expressed by many. This proposes that resources are only as good as the funding that is available. Consequently, without access to the correct resources, services and adaptations cannot be put in place to support learners, which in turn, prohibits the SEND guidance from being followed.

Nonetheless, a significant pressure has been placed upon post-16 colleges to provide special educational support for an increasing number of students. Yet, the data collected from this research would suggest that there does not appear to be enough resources and/or funding available to provide the support required for the amount of post-16 learners with an EHC plan. However, within the guidance it highlights the need for LA to have greater regard to the needs of young people with SEND (DfE and DoH, 2015). This implies that support in meeting the needs of learners with SEND should be provided to post-16 establishments from LA.

***Educational Health Care (EHC) plans***

In addition, another theme that emerged throughout the data collected was concerns around EHC plans. Throughout the data there appeared to be an increasingly negative interpretation of EHC plans and how effective they are in supporting learners to achieve their long-term outcomes. This was primarily due to the time it takes for the documents to be updated by LA and the accessibility of the plans for both the young person and professionals.

One participant expressed that the SEND CoP had not influenced their practice and the way in which they support learners with EHC plans based upon the notion that: ‘The process of receiving updated EHC Plans can be delayed therefore not reflecting current needs’ (Participant 2502, tutor).

This suggests that if the documentation is not up to date, and consequently not reflective of the learners needs, then the correct provision cannot be put in place to support learners, hence the SEND guidance cannot be sufficiently adhered to. This results in learners not receiving the most effective intervention, thus preventing young people from being able to educationally progress.

Similarly, the matter of out-dated plans was brought to the forefront by another tutor, who also felt that outdated plans were an issue:

The problem is a lot of the educational healthcare plans are out of date and badly out of date. There's some that are 2016, 2017 (Participant 1911, tutor).

This extract suggests that EHC plans can be as much as eight years outdated. This consequently contradicts what is outlined within the SEND guidance as it is stated that:

Where a student has an EHC plan, the LA must review that plan as a minimum every twelve months, including a review of the student’s support (DfE and DoH, 2015, p116).

Not only did participants raise issues around the time scale it takes to receive an updated EHC plan but concerns were also highlighted around the quality of EHC plans.

‘The outcomes in EHC plans are not always worded correctly meaning that

they are not always user friendly. The young person's voice is not always

applied. The plans can be vague and not always specific to the young

person.’ (Participant 3010, manager)

Here the participant indicates that the EHC plans are not always accessible or reflective of the young person’s needs. It is also suggested that a person-centred approach is not always clear within the plan. This again implies that educational professionals cannot engage with the SEND guidance if the documents surrounding the SEND CoP are not portraying the quality that is then expected of educational professionals.

In addition, participants also raised concerns around the provision available for learners with an identified SEND without EHC plans, as it was implied that learners who do not have an EHC Plan are not exposed to additional support.

‘I think there's more emphasis with an educational healthcare plan. I don't think we treat them equally now.’ (Participant 2502, tutor)

‘Additional support…is mainly only given to those that get funded’ (Participant 2606, tutor)

However, within the guidance it is indicated that post-16 establishments have a duty to provide special educational provision for learners with SEND, whether or not the learners have an EHC plan (DfE and DoH, 2015). Therefore, the funding a learner is entitled to or one’s access to an EHC plan should not have an impact on their access to general support. This has caused both professionals and parents to perceive an EHC plan as a ‘golden ticket’ to guarantee that significant provision is put in place for a young person with SEND (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019, p. 36). This appears to also be the case amongst participants within the study.

Nevertheless, participants appeared to overall agree that the SEND CoP is helpful in supporting young people to achieve. This was also made evident by the data collected during the interviews. When participants were asked if they felt that the outcomes outlined in young people’s EHC plans were realistic and attainable for young people with SEND to achieve, the general response was positive. However, participants did acknowledge that they do not believe that all learners with SEND will enter full-time employment or independent living, but learners may take alternative routes such as supported internships, volunteering, part-time employment etc (Participant 3010, manager). One tutor did highlight the importance of students being ready for their next steps after college, by referring to an example of a student not being ready for her supported internship (Participant 2502, tutor). It was suggested that this was due to a lack of attendees, and as a result communication, during an annual review, which resulted in the wrong decision being made, the participant suggested that: ‘[in annual reviews] all people need to be involved and they aren’t’ (Participant 2502).

However, in contrast to this, when other tutors were asked if they are able to contribute to EHC plan annual reviews, they generally expressed how they were able to contribute their opinions by completing forms prior to the reviews taking place (Participant 1911, tutor and Participant 2606, tutor). These participants appeared to feel happy with this level of contribution and also expressed that they felt confident in having some level of contribution to SEND documentation. Participants also highlighted the importance of the outcome section for learners within an EHC plan. Participants felt that the outcomes were mostly attainable and realistic for the learners and that it was essential that learners with an identified SEND had aspirational outcomes to work towards. This indicates that some educational professionals have a more positive outlook towards the SEND CoP and the influence that it has had on their practice.

**Discussion: to what extent has the 2015 SEND CoP influenced professionals’ practice?**

The main findings from this study confirm that professionals working within post-16 education have been influenced by the 2015 SEND CoP. One of the themes that emerged from the findings of this study, emphasised that a lack of CPD continued to be a significant barrier in the implementation of the SEND CoP. Many participants felt that they had not received the correct level of CPD from their place of work, and more was needed for participants to understand how to implement the guidance into their practice.

In synchrony with the participants comments discovered within the findings, Palikara eta al (2019) highlighted from their research that professions working within SEND felt anxious about the SEND reforms as they obtained little CPD in how to address matters raised within the SEND CoP. Additionally, the findings highlighted that there was limited guidance in how to implement the graduated approach into practice. Participants expressed that they understood the graduated approach, but there was little evidence that participants had been applying it to their practice, again because there had been a lack of training on how to do so. This indicated that little CPD had been implemented since the reform was introduced. Somantri and Iskandar (2021) highlight the importance of implementing CPD, as they suggest that education providers are able to attain the highest standards when staff are provided with the opportunity to learn new information via CPD.

Furthermore, another barrier to implementation of the SEND CoP was a lack of funding, and consequently, resources to apply the SEND guidance into practice. Within the data, a lack of funding was raised by many participants, who expressed that without adequate funding the correct resources cannot be put in place to ensure the needs of the learners are being met. Therefore, this meant that aspects of the SEND CoP could not be sufficiently implemented. Participants expressed that not only was there a lack of resources in place within their organisation, but resources had also been withdrawn despite the increase in learners with EHC plans. Marsh (2023) highlights how managing the current demand for EHC plans has created implications to the finding provided by LAs. This was evident within the findings as little financial support had been provided by the LA to resolve the increase in learners with an EHC plan and thus the demand for more specialist provision. Marsh, Gray and Norwich (2024) highlight how there is a strong link between high needs funding and the use of specialist provision. However, participants gave little consideration to the complexities of commissioning services due to high needs funding, and instead focused solely on in house funding provided by the college.

In addition, the degree to which professionals engage with the SEND CoP is dependent on the job role that a professional occupies within an establishment, and whether the SLT considers it as a priority. Cole (2003) highlights how the role played by SLT and the SENCO, has a direct influence over the ultimate ethos and effectiveness of an educational institution. This indicates that without recognition from SLT, staff will be less willing to engage with policies such as the SEND CoP.

The way educational professionals perceive their responsibility of learners with an identified SEND was also highlighted within the findings. The data illustrated that not all participants felt that learners with an identified SEND were their responsibility, and instead, it was suggested that the responsibility of these learners rested solely with the SENCO. Consequently, not all participants were able to recognise that a key aspect of the SEND CoP is that all educational professionals take responsibility, and are able to appropriately, and inclusively, interact with learners with an identified SEND as part of their role as practitioner within education. Palikara et al. (2019) state that the way professionals recognise their own responsibility and the responsibility of others with regards to working in SEND influences how they approach the practicalities of SEND policy.

Finally, the significance of EHC plans was highlighted as an important aspect within the SEND CoP. However, participants felt that EHC plans were often out-dated and badly written. Skipp and Hopwood (2016) propose that this is due to the surge in admin that is now required following the CoP, as it has resulted in LA employing fewer experienced SEND caseworkers, which has consequently led to low quality EHC plans and amplified delays in plans getting updated. The findings demonstrate that this has resulted in professionals not recognising EHC plans as a beneficial document that enables the educational professional to support the young person with SEND. Lamb (2019) highlights that for educational practitioners to have greater confidence within the SEND CoP there must be a balance of developing the quality as well as the distribution of EHC plans. Concerns regarding the EHC plan Annual Review process were also emphasised within the findings, as participants felt that there was often a lack of attendees and / or communication regarding the young person. Themaat (2019) suggests that the EHC plan process is only meaningful if all people involved with the young person have a voice, particularly the young person themselves. If all relevant stakeholders are not involved in the decision making process, then the appropriate planning to enable the young person to reach their outcomes cannot happen. As well as this, it implies that a graduated approach is not being applied, as a co-production review involving all relevant individuals has not taken place. Thus, the SEND CoP is not being applied to professionals’ practice.

Despite the barriers to implementation that were discovered, the data shows that the SEND CoP had influenced professionals positively to a certain extent. Participants expressed how the SEND guidance had enabled them to see the importance of altering their practice to suit the needs of the learners. As well as this, participants were able to recognise how they have changed their practice in accordance with the guidance. All participants emphasised how the SEND CoP had enabled them to develop as a professional, thus highlighting that the SEND guidance has had a positive impact on educational professionals. Burch (2017) states how educational policy can navigate the conduct and movements of educational professionals via the prospects and procedures that they impose. This is apparent as the data demonstrates that educational professionals are not only changing their practice for the benefit of the learner but also altering their attitude and approach.

**Conclusion**

This study has found that nearly ten years on after implementation of the SEND reform professionals do feel positively influenced. However, numerous barriers are still in place that prevent the SEND CoP from being effectively adopted by all education professionals. As both practitioners and academics, we feel that there is currently a gap between policy and practice that needs to be addressed. The guidance outlined within the 2015 SEND CoP appears to be unattainable for many educational professionals as the adequate level of special educational support is not currently in place to enable educational professionals to apply the guidance to their practice. This is because practitioners are not provided with the resources that enable learners to reach their educational outcomes. As well as a minimal number of resources, practitioners also lack the professional development that they require in order to implement the guidance into their practice. There is a need for intervention from LA’s to provide ongoing staff development to all professionals working within post 16 education. In the hope that professionals will gain a deeper understanding of how to work in accordance with what is proposed within the 2015 SEND CoP. Without additional learning and development for educational practitioners, the SEND guidance is in many ways an unrealistic document when applied to practice.

Lastly, we acknowledge some potential limitations of this study. For example, due to the nature of qualitative research, generalisability needs to be made cautiously with acknowledgment of the ways in which the researchers, the research design, the relatively small sample size (18 participants from a post-16 college in England), and the context shaped the findings. In addition, we recognise that the majority of participants were in the role as 'tutor'. To meet learning needs of children and young people with an identified SEND, more studies are needed to investigate other key stakeholders' perspectives and experiences of the implementation of the 2015 SEND CoP. These stakeholders should include policy makers, teachers, parents, children and young people.

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Table 1. Research participant characteristics

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Participant code name | Job role | Years working in post-16 |
| Participant 2606 | Tutor | 16 + years |
| Participant 2004 | Tutor | 16 + years |
| Participant 3010 | Manager | 5-15 years |
| Participant 2406 | Other | Under 4 years |
| Participant 1912 | Manager | 5-15 years |
| Participant 2003 | Tutor | 5-15 years |
| Participant 0504 | Tutor | 5-15 years |
| Participant 8719 | Tutor | 5-15 years |
| Participant 2705 | Other | 16 + years |
| Participant 3821 | LSW | 5-15 years |
| Participant 1911 | Tutor | 5-15 years |
| Participant 2842 | LSW | 5-15 years |
| Participant 5843 | Tutor | 5-15 years |
| Participant 1603 | Tutor | 5-15 years |
| Participant 2311 | Tutor | Under 4 years |
| Participant 9648 | LSW | 5-15 years |
| Participant 2502 | Tutor | 16 + years |
| Participant 0509 | Manager | 5-15 years |

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