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The role pressures for Special Educational Needs Coordinators as managers, leaders and advocates in the Covid-19 pandemic: implications for inclusive education

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide a literature-based consideration of the role of the Special Needs Educational Coordinator (SENCo) in England during COVID-19 pandemic conditions of school lockdown and partial reopening for children classified as vulnerable. The review indicates that the pressures and tensions already experienced by SENCos (around time, workload, status, and their prescribed dichotomised managerial *and* strategic role) were intensified under pandemic conditions, risking inadequate or delayed provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. The review also considers research prompted by related concerns around the exclusion or marginalisation of this group of students, through legal and illegal practices, during and following national lockdown. It had been suggested that the risk of exclusion might increase at this time, thus highlighting the advocacy role of SENCos, and small-scale research did report a lack of involvement of SENCos in strategic crisis planning at school level. It is concluded that an advocacy role for students with special educational needs and disabilities who were at risk of becoming increasingly marginalised within school and wider communities during the COVID-19 pandemic should now be considered as central to the SENCos' remit.

Keywords: SENCos; advocacy; inclusion-related leadership; crisis planning.

Introduction

This paper draws on the literature concerning the SENCo role during the recent COVID-19 pandemic and on the preceding literature that addresses the pressures confronting many SENCos in England and elsewhere. The assumption in statutory guidance that SENCos are members of a school's senior leadership team such that they can routinely exercise strategic leadership contradicts the experience of a significant proportion of SENCos in schools in England.¹ The latest Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEN/D) Code of Practice issued by the Departments for Education and of Health² shifts responsibility from SENCos as it requires all class teachers to take responsibility for the children in their class regardless of their additional needs. This shift raises questions around the future relevance of the SENCo role.³ However, recent government policy proposals seek to expand the number of qualified SENCos, particularly in Early Years Education (EYE), by introducing a non-accredited level 3 National Professional Qualification (NPQ) focused on leadership skills to replace the current level 7 accredited national award in SEN/D coordination.⁴ The suggestion is that the new NPQ will mean that SENCos are well-placed to join senior leadership teams, thus perpetuating the current variable representation of SENCos in such teams and their variable capacity to influence practices in their own schools.

Research funded by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) in a collaboration between the Universities of Plymouth and Exeter sought to determine the level of involvement of SENCos in school planning once school closures were required by

government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic alongside partial re-opening and the organisation of offsite and onsite provision for ‘vulnerable’ students.^{1, 5} This research also investigated SENCos’ involvement in planning for the return of those students in the event of full reopening of schools in autumn 2020. Anecdotal evidence had suggested that pressures to remove or exclude students from school, especially those with additional needs and disabilities, were being exacerbated by pandemic conditions.^{1, 6} The unique context of schools in England⁷ and sensitivity around exclusionary pressures and practices in purportedly inclusive schools^{8, 9} resulted in an extremely small sample (n=31), prompting consideration around research design but also the authenticity of research participant accounts.^{10, 11} It has been noted that the pressures on schools related to governmental accountability procedures may induce some to engage in impression management¹² and conceal illicit practices,¹³ including unlawful exclusionary practices.^{14, 15}

The literature discussed below serves to highlight numerous ongoing concerns around the SENCo role. In the following section, details on recent pandemic conditions are provided in order to convey the context that SENCos in England were navigating and will continue to navigate. It is then suggested that pandemic conditions and research findings have highlighted that the advocacy and leadership aspects of the SENCo role are pivotal in reducing the exclusion or marginalisation of ‘vulnerable’ students¹⁶, and that the latter requires SENCos’ involvement in future crisis planning at school level.^{1, 5}

Context

School closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were mandated by the UK government on 20th March 2020 in a national lockdown.¹⁷ Globally, it has been estimated that school closures impacted approximately 80% of children and young people (CYP) across 188 countries where such closures were intended to control the prevalence of COVID-19.^{18, 19, 20} Partial concurrent re-opening was designed to ensure that the children of key workers and those classified as vulnerable, including students with designated SEN/D and Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), could attend school.^{21, 22} Parents were assured that provision for those with EHCPs would continue through adaptations to Section 42 of the Children and Families Act.²³ Accordingly, ‘reasonable adjustments’ became ‘reasonable endeavours’ in response to the pandemic until 25th September 2020.^{6, 22, 24} However, discrepancies between local authorities’ interpretations of ‘endeavours’ were identified, indicating that professional support for CYP with SEN/D and their families involved widely varying levels of provision.²⁵ A House of Commons Education Committee report noted such geographic inconsistencies and their amplification due to the pandemic: ‘pre-existing inequalities in the system have been exacerbated because so little has been done in some places for children who are already experiencing difficulties in their education’.²⁶

Initial research conducted in the first few weeks and months of the COVID-19 pandemic focussed on the impact of school closures on CYP with SEN/D and their families, particularly on their mental health. It was found that such families typically experienced more stressors than their neuro-typical counterparts as school closures disrupted established daily routines, inducing anxiety and distress amongst parents and CYP.²¹ Notably, parents reported that provision for their child in the initial lockdown period was frequently inappropriate to their individual needs, especially, where distance or online learning lessons were not differentiated.⁶ The Department for Education introduced an online school (the Oak Academy) that aimed to assist schools in maintaining online learning programmes with funding being allocated for the production of 10,000 online lessons in the academic year 2020-2021.^{27, 28} Parents, however, argued that no differentiated or specific content was provided for students with SEN/D at the initial launch,²⁹ and Oak Academy was subsequently urged to reinforce its online accessibility arrangements and develop a separate specialist

curriculum for CYP with SEN/D.³⁰ It should be noted here that the unique learning profiles of CYP with SEN/D mean that some struggle with the routine demands of a classroom environment and therefore preferred online methods of learning and interaction with teachers.⁶

During the initial weeks of lockdown, 73% of families in one small-scale study had eligible places at school and, yet, only 8% elected to send their child to school.²¹ This accords with national data from the Department for Education (17th April) estimating that only 5% of students classified as a 'Child in Need' or with an EHCP had attended school.³¹ This figure gradually increased throughout the pandemic and it is likely that related health risks contributed to parents choosing to home educate²¹ whilst schools were also expected to risk assess CYP with SEN/D in relation to COVID-19.²² Research by the Disabled Children's Partnership³² found that parents of disabled CYP felt neglected by professionals and were having to negotiate increased educational and caring demands. It was also found that lack of support from schools and other agencies had impacted the mental health of families and CYP with SEN/D.³³

In addition to research investigating the impact of absence from formal education on CYP with SEN/D during both lockdown and the return to school, concerns were raised relating to the practices of off-rolling and unlawful exclusions. In other international contexts, such exclusions are described as 'grey' since, for example, parents may be pressurised or manipulated into consenting to home education.^{8, 14} Students with SEN/D are seven times more likely to be formally excluded, and more likely to be unlawfully excluded.³⁴ Unlawful exclusions also include students being sent home from school without formal record being made, leaving them with no access to educational provision.^{35, 36, 37, 38} Research commissioned by Ofsted in 2019 confirmed that CYP with SEN/D are more likely to be excluded, with teachers reporting that behavioural issues may be exaggerated in order to justify formal exclusion.³⁹ In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was suggested that schools would need to mitigate the heightened risks of exclusion for such students and balance multiple complex factors when determining the most appropriate support for CYP with SEN/D at that time.⁶ A key consideration was how those with SEN/D but lacking an EHCP might have experienced reduced access to provision despite their complex needs, and how careful planning should be undertaken to ensure reintegration of these students.⁶ Some schools had been encouraged to avoid permanent exclusion and elect for managed moves.⁶ The 'managed move' process is defined as a voluntary and legal agreement between schools, parents or carers and a student for that student to change school.^{40, 41} Managed moves can be viewed as the legitimising of an exclusionary process by government in which parents or carers are at risk of being pressurised by schools into endorsing such a move.^{9, 11} It remains unclear how such practices have been affected by COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown conditions; however, research with SENCos indicates continuing reliance on managed moves to remove CYP with SEN/D from a school.^{1, 5} These practices also serve to highlight the potential tension between student mental health or wellbeing and academic 'catch up' in the post-COVID-19 educational landscape.^{6, 42}

Pre-COVID SENCo role

When considering the role of SENCos in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it must be recognised that this role had previously been widely problematised.^{43, 44, 45} The shifting of responsibility to all class teachers for all children in their classes, as required in statutory guidance,² has raised questions about the usefulness of the SENCo role.^{3, 46} However, an increasing pressure on SENCos to engage with issues around social justice has been noted.⁴⁷ The relationship between SENCos and education policy was specified in the first Special Educational Needs Code of Practice.^{48, 49} The role has subsequently been influenced by

government, research, schools and those working in special educational needs.⁵⁰ Hence, shifts have been identified in terminology,⁴³ from management terms such as supervising to terms relating to strategic leadership such as school culture in later SEN/D Code of Practice policies.^{51, 52} The role is now recognised to be multifaceted.⁴⁷ A qualitative study in 2005 found that SENCos adopt multiple, and concurrent, identities that were summarised as arbiter, rescuer, auditor, collaborator and expert,⁵³ confirming observations around the complexity of the role rendering its execution potentially problematic.^{44, 54}

Pragmatic issues, including lack of adequate time to undertake role demands, are recurrent themes in the relevant literature. Studies highlight how SENCos can feel that time constraints limit their capacity to perform their role effectively.⁴⁵ Such time pressures often result from the dual responsibility of a SENCo role and class teaching.^{49, 50, 54} Subsequent SEN/D Codes of Practice have been criticised for introducing ambiguity around adequate time for SENCos to complete duties which include varied and ever-changing elements of the SENCo remit.^{2, 50, 54} Research has prompted recommendations that statutory time should be introduced for those working as SENCos, to work in conjunction with a government 'Recruitment and Retention Strategy',⁵⁵ which involves reducing teacher workload.^{44, 56} To date, however, no statutory allocated time for SENCos has been proposed.⁴ One such additional SENCo responsibility, following the SEN/D Code of Practice,² is liaison and collaboration with parents to support their child through appropriate educational provision.^{50, 53, 57} The relationship between SENCos and parents is described as a unique power dynamic through which decisions around a child's provision are carefully negotiated, although some SENCos will be able to exercise greater professional judgement than others.⁵⁸ The importance of maintaining an open and supportive dialogue with parents to ensure that the needs of students are regularly evaluated and met is frequently noted by SENCos^{44, 55, 58,} however, such relationships may become strained where SENCos work part-time and opportunities for regular meetings to discuss a child's needs are limited.⁵⁰

The role of SENCo as expert, providing advice to parents and other professionals is evidenced, despite SENCos not always identifying themselves as such,^{53, 54, 59} and the latest SEN/D Code of Practice emphasising their strategic whole school role.² Research has considered the role of the National Award for SEN Coordination (NASENCO), a postgraduate qualification at Master's level, in increasing knowledge and self-efficacy in the area of SEN/D and statutory processes associated with the SENCo role.^{50, 60} The requirement that SENCos hold the award within three years of commencing the role^{61, 62} contributes to this expert status amongst staff and parents.^{63, 64} SENCos are expected to provide expertise to support teachers in their statutory duty to be responsible and accountable for the progress of their students with SEN/D,² and it has been argued that SENCos are key in working with school leadership, staff and parents to continually establish an inclusive culture within their school.^{43, 65, 66} However, it has been found that SENCos who have completed the NASENCO award are more likely to complete whole-school organisational responsibilities.⁴⁵ Historically, SEN/D Codes of Practice have incorrectly assumed that the statutory school SENCo will be a member of the school leadership team and, therefore, able to fulfil a strategic whole-school leadership role.^{43, 45, 49} Despite policy indicating that the role is primarily strategic,² managerial aspects must often be carefully balanced with leadership responsibilities to ensure that schools provide an inclusive education for CYP with SEN/D.⁶⁷ Hence, the statutory description of the SENCo role differs significantly from its execution in practice settings where pragmatic factors, including time and resource constraints, are significant pressures for SENCos.^{44, 50, 55}

SENCo as manager and leader

Despite the expertise attributed to SENCos by school colleagues, the associated status is unclear and inconsistent.^{67, 68} Policy recommendations, for example, the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee⁶⁹ and subsequent SEN/D Codes of Practice such as the current statutory version² explicitly suggest that SENCos should be in an organisational leadership position to ensure an inclusive school culture.^{44, 45, 61} A SENCo's position within a senior leadership team is indicative of a school's commitment to inclusive values and practices, and to sustaining an inclusive school culture.⁷⁰ Despite this, not all SENCos are members of senior management teams,^{71, 72} which inhibits their capacity for strategic or organisational level initiatives.^{1, 5, 43} Such inconsistency dictates that the SENCo role will be interpreted differently depending on how the role is defined in the school context, leading to performance being measured against varying professional standards and not only the SEN/D Code of Practice.⁵⁰ Immediately prior to lockdown, only one third of surveyed SENCos in Done and Knowler's study¹ reported being consulted by senior school leaders, and dialogue around SEN/D provision diminished in the days preceding pandemic induced school closures. At interview, no understanding was evidenced of what crisis planning might entail beyond immediate and school-wide responses to the specific event of COVID-19 related school closure; non-senior leadership SENCos were not involved in planning for offsite provision or partial reopening provision for vulnerable students.^{1, 5}

Typically, the SENCo role typically becomes one of middle leadership, creating tensions between the managerial and strategic leadership elements of their remit.⁶⁷ Management related activities include the performance management of staff and distribution of resources, for example, the deployment of teaching assistants^{43, 73} and this descriptor is indicative of statutory and administrative duties. This middle management role contradicts the designation of SENCos as strategic agents of change in delivering inclusive school practices and cultures.⁷² Bureaucratised accountability practices can work against ensuring that CYP with SEN/D can access inclusive education provision^{61, 64, 67} and SENCos can experience feelings of isolation when seeking to balance managerial and leadership responsibilities, with some fearing that a senior leadership position would hinder their assessment of the impact of inclusive practice on a day-to-day basis.^{54, 68} The complexities associated with balancing managerial and leadership responsibilities, as reinforced in statutory policy, are suggestive of variation in a SENCo role that will also be influenced by individual motivation to ensure that inclusive practices are integral to teaching and learning in schools,^{47, 67} as well as the school context. When asked directly about role tensions at interview in Done and Knowler's study, both inexperienced and the most experienced SENCos appeared unaware of the distinction between managerial and strategic activities outlined in statutory guidance, and some exemplified the SENCo role enshrined in historical statutory guidance of in-house expert; as above, whole school initiatives were understood as organising online provision for all students, with only one participant explicitly referring to students with SEN/D as a priority in this context.^{1, 5}

Pandemic pressures on SENCos

SENCos were amongst the team of professionals responsible for enacting "reasonable endeavours" and completing COVID-19 risk assessments for CYP with SEN/D to ensure access to appropriate education provision during the pandemic and the full opening of schools in September 2020.^{22, 2, 74} Regular guidance was provided to schools, including updates from government departments, and John Coughlan (Chief Executive of Hampshire County Council) reported that, prior to the 22nd July 2020, approximately 200 statements of guidance had been released to schools, which was later deemed onerous for schools.³³ Educational inequities were experienced by CYP with SEN/D in the first lockdown period,^{26, 31, 32} and this situation may have been exacerbated by the proliferation of guidance directed at

school leadership teams. The latter necessitated rapid reaction on the part of schools whilst simultaneously balancing the needs of their diverse school communities and the emerging needs of all students.⁷⁴

The Department for Education has acknowledged inequities highlighted by the pandemic, including measures around the allocation of laptops and mobile internet connections to “disadvantaged” students.⁷⁵ Students with SEN/D are over-represented in this group.^{76, 77} Montacute and Cullinane compared access to IT equipment and internet connectivity for students enrolled in private or affluent state-maintained schools and those in state-maintained schools located in areas of high social deprivation and identified marked differences.⁷⁸ In Done and Knowler’s study on strategic crisis planning, SENCos surveyed in schools within areas of high social deprivation were engaged in post-lockdown school-wide initiatives to supply, not only IT resources and teaching materials, but also food parcels to families in need.¹ Concerns related to social justice manifested as the prioritisation of support for families experiencing financial hardship over and above provision for CYP with SEN/D.¹ No SENCos reported witnessing or being aware of exclusionary practices; however, at interview, it became clear that moving CYP with SEN/D to other schools, or introducing part-time timetabling pre and post-lockdown, were perceived as routine practices and not as exclusionary.^{1, 5} Survey responses indicated minimal concern around exclusion and the heightened risk of exclusion under pandemic conditions identified earlier,⁶ specifically, for students with SEN/D, LAC (looked after children) or those receiving free school meals (FSM being the proxy for socio-economic disadvantage in school and national data).¹ In terms of the dichotomised (strategic and managerial) SENCo role⁴⁷ during and following pandemic-induced lockdowns, strategic responsibilities related to CYP with SEN/D and their protection from exclusionary pressures appeared to be eclipsed by wider concerns around socio-economic inequities and community support.¹ At interview, only one SENCo articulated a strategic vision and described associated actions intended to address a high rate of exclusion in which CYP with SEN/D were disproportionately represented. The support of this SENCo’s school principal was held to be pivotal in effecting such change, suggesting that senior school leadership membership in itself may be insufficient, and that a trichotomised role should be envisaged in which advocacy for CYP with SEN/D features prominently.^{1, 5}

The managerial aspect of the SENCo role, particularly COVID-19 risk assessment for CYP with SEN/D, has been linked to external or governmental scrutiny.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, the NASENCO award learning outcomes fail to include any mention of training in emergency or crisis planning; instead, they are concerned with the planning, implementation and continual review of SEN provision.⁷⁹ Consequently, SENCos, with their postgraduate level training, did not appear to have been adequately utilised as a resource to support COVID-19 school planning or involved in the allocation of resources; SENCos were far more likely to be utilised as distributors of resources, in a very practical sense, and not involved in school-wide planning.^{1, 5}

Additionally, SENCos have liaised with parents who have had negative experiences of accessing school-based provision throughout the pandemic and considered home education as an alternative.⁸⁰ Prior research has identified a growing trend in home education, with parents citing lack of support, provision not viewed as inclusive, and concerns over their child’s mental health and wellbeing, prompting the notion of parents as consumers through school choice to be rejected as inapplicable for CYP with SEN/D.^{81, 82, 83, 84} It is also the case that SENCos may risk their professional status by challenging senior management decision-making around exclusionary practices,⁸ nevertheless, a minority of SENCos in Done and Knowler’s study reported an improvement in relations with parents as there had been

additional opportunities for relationship-building and liaison, begging the question as to why this had been problematic prior to lockdown.¹

In seeking to facilitate inclusive education, despite documented role pressures and tensions between the national policy agendas of both inclusion and raising academic standards,^{15,47} it has been argued that SENCo activity evidences a value base of caring and acting in the best interests of others.⁸⁵ This care-based advocacy role is also implied in Kearns.⁵³ The COVID-19 pandemic has brought such advocacy leadership into sharp relief,⁶ including the need for SENCos to prioritise advocacy that aims to sustain an inclusive ethos and support for all CYP at risk of greater marginalisation.¹ In the event of policy changes that lower the level of SENCo qualification, as proposed by the current government,⁴ it seems less likely that SENCos will be in a position to effectively transform their school culture or, indeed, to intervene on behalf of CYP with SEN/D in order to minimise the risk of exclusionary practices. The issue then will become one of who is equipped to advocate for CYP with SEN/D and ensure that they experience an inclusive education.^{44,61} As Hallett and Hallett have noted, given the existing managerial and leadership pressures experienced by SENCos and changes to statutory guidance, advocacy may become increasingly problematic.^{3,46}

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated several lines of enquiry relating to school SENCos. Existing studies on exclusion had already suggested that students with SEN/D are more likely to be excluded, and a multiplier effect of inter-related school, home and societal factors has been documented.^{6,34,36} During the initial lockdown period, it was argued that CYP with SEN/D might experience inadequate access to education⁶ and that their complex needs could make school re-integration challenging.⁴² Certainly, SENCos were confronted with unique circumstances as students' statutory provision and needs had to be balanced with school requirements (as dictated in government guidance) and subsequent pressures.^{6,66} Since not all SENCos are in school senior leadership teams, their function as strategic planners and change agents was questionable prior to the pandemic-induced lockdowns.⁶¹ Lockdowns have highlighted that the capacity of such SENCos, and those in senior leadership teams, to participate in strategic crisis planning for CYP with SEN/D was limited.^{1,5} Research suggests that existing pressures on SENCos' experience around time, workload, the exact remit and status of their role have been exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as illustrated in the process of risk assessing all students with EHCPs prior to full opening in September 2020.^{43,74} This demonstrates that, in response to the pandemic, the SENCo role has involved an increasing managerial and administrative workload, with limited capacity to ensure inclusive policy and practice is being implemented at a whole-school level.^{1,54,86}

If the school is considered to be a 'microcosm of society', measures such as social distancing, increased hygiene measures and temporary targeted lockdowns indicate a 'new normal' in current COVID-19 society.³⁴ Research has indicated wide variation in how education professionals have responded to these new challenges, including a likely increase in exclusionary practices.^{1,6,20} For CYP with SEN/D, the importance of SENCos managing novel and existing pressures, and engaging in advocacy, is clear if such CYP are not to become increasingly marginalised in school communities and socially.^{18,34}

Conflict of interest statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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