Balancing pressures for Special Educational Needs Coordinators as managers, leaders and advocates in the emerging context of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This paper considers the role of the Special Needs Educational Coordinator (SENCo) during COVID-19 pandemic conditions of school lockdown with partial reopening for children classified as 'vulnerable'. It is argued that the pressures and tensions already experienced by SENCos, for example, around time, workload, status, their prescribed managerial *and* strategic role have been highlighted and, indeed, exacerbated by pandemic conditions, particularly through the requirement to risk assess all pupils with EHCPs (Education, Health and Care plans prior to the full opening of schools. This paper concludes by additionally considering how SENCos may act as advocates for pupils with SEND, who during this pandemic, are at risk of becoming increasingly marginalised within school communities.

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

Introduction

This paper explores the literature on the SENCo role during the recent COVID-19 pandemic and preceding literature that considers the pressures faced by many SENCos. The assumption that SENCos are in senior roles or members of a senior leadership team such that they can exercise strategic leadership contradicts the experience of a significant proportion of SENCos in schools in England. Hallett and Hallett (2020) have also questioned the future relevance of this role since the latest Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice issued by the Departments of Health and for Education (DoH & DfE, 2015) shifts responsibility away from SENCos, requiring all class teachers to take responsibility for children in their class. Research funded by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) is underway in a collaboration between the Universities of Plymouth and Exeter. The objective is to determine the level of involvement of SENCos in school planning once school closures were required by government, in organising offsite and onsite provision for 'vulnerable' students, and in planning for the return of those students in the event of full reopening of schools in autumn 2020. This research will also focus on exclusionary pressures facing specific groups of students with additional needs, a preliminary literature review is published here as it highlights many existing concerns around the SENCo role. Below, details on prevailing and future pandemic conditions are provided in order to convey the context which SENCos have been, and will be, navigating.

Context

School closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic were introduced by the UK Government on 20th March 2020 as part of a national lockdown (Department for Education & Williamson, 2020a). Worldwide estimates suggest that school closures impacted approximately 80% of children and young people across 188 countries where such closures were intended to limit the spread of COVID-19 (Lee, 2020:421; Petretto *et al.,* 2020:1; Viner

et al., 2020:397). The UK Department for Education did, however, ensure that the children of key workers and 'vulnerable' pupils, including pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), were able to attend school (Ashbury *et al.,* 2020; DfE, 2020a). In these circumstances and during full school opening, parents were encouraged to send their child to school and were assured that provision for those with EHCPs would continue through adaptations to Section 42 of the Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014). Accordingly, 'reasonable adjustments' became 'reasonable endeavours' in response to the pandemic until 25th September 2020 (Daniels *et al.,* 2020:5; DfE, 2020b). However, initial discrepancies between local authorities' interpretations of 'endeavours' have been identified, suggesting that professionals who support pupils with SEND and their families may enact vastly different levels of provision during the pandemic (De Winter, 2020). A recent House of Commons Education Committee report highlights such geographic inconsistencies and their amplification due to the pandemic: 'The 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'(1st July 2020, HC 254, Q691).

Initial research conducted during the first few weeks and months of the COVID-19 pandemic has focussed on the impact that school closures have had on pupils with SEND and their families, particularly, on their mental health and wellbeing. Ashbury *et al.* (2020) highlight how these families typically have experienced more stressors than their neurotypical counterparts as school closures created disruption to established daily routines and led to feelings of anxiety, causing significant distress amongst parents and young people involved in the study. Notably, parents reported that their child's provision in the initial lockdown period was often unsuitable to meet their individual needs, especially, through distance or online learning where lessons may not have been appropriately differentiated (Daniels *et al.,* 2020:4). Furthermore, the Department for Education initiated an online school named Oak Academy which aimed to support schools in maintaining online learning programmes; funding was allocated for the production of 10,000 online lessons during the academic year 2020-2021 (DfE & Williamson, 2020; Dickens, 2020). Parents, however, noted that no differentiated or specific content was provided for pupils with SEND during the initial launch (Special Needs Jungle, 2020). Oak Academy has since reinforced its online accessibility arrangements and developed a separate specialist curriculum for pupils with SEND (Oak National Academy, 2020). Due to the unique learning profiles of pupils with SEND, some pupils that ordinarily struggle with the demands of a classroom environment have preferred online methods of learning and interaction with their teachers (Daniels *et al.,* 2020).

During the initial weeks of lockdown, Ashbury *et al.* (2020) noted that 73% of families in their small sample had eligible places at school, yet, only 8% had chosen to send their child to school. This proportion accords with the first national data collected by the Department of Education on Friday 17th April which estimated that 5% of pupils classified as a 'Child in Need' or with an EHCP had attended school (DfE, 2020c:3). This figure has been gradually increasing throughout the pandemic. Ashbury *et al*. (2020) indicate that the health risks involved may have been a factor in parents choosing to educate their child at home, whilst schools were also expected to risk assess pupils with SEND in relation to COVID-19 (DfE, 2020b). Research by the Disabled Children's Partnership (2020) found that parents felt forgotten by professionals and that parents were having to balance increased educational and caring demands for their disabled child. It has also been found that a lack of support from

schools and other services has had an impact on the mental health of families and children with SEND (House of Commons Education Committee, 1st July 2020, HC 254, Q690).

Whilst emerging research is considering the impact that absence from formal education may have had on pupils with SEND both during lockdown and the return to school, questions are also raised that are related to pre-existing concerns around the practices of 'off-rolling' and 'unlawful' exclusions. The latter have increasingly affected pupils with SEND (Graham *et al*., 2019). Unlawful exclusions include pupils being sent home from school without formal record being made and, subsequently, leaving pupils with no access to educational provision (Daniels & Cole, 2010:117; Gill *et al.,* 2017; Timpson, 2019:54; Ofsted, 2019). Formal exclusion data collected in 2019, which includes permanent and fixed term exclusions, suggests that pupils with SEND are more likely to be excluded, with some teachers reporting that 'behavioural issues' are a significant factor (YouGov, 2019:11; Office for National Statistics, 2020). With regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, Daniels *et al.* (2020) suggest that schools will need to mitigate the heightened risks of exclusion for these pupils and balance multiple complex factors when deciding how best to support pupils with SEND at this time. This report also considers how those with SEND, but without an EHCP, may have experienced reduced access to provision despite their complex needs, and how careful planning must be undertaken to ensure reintegration of these pupils (Daniels *et al.,* 2020:2). In particular, they share their troubling finding that some schools in their sample have been 'encouraged to rescind permanent exclusions and opt instead for a managed move with no return' (Daniels *et al.,* 2020:2). The 'managed move' process is defined as 'a voluntary agreement between schools, parents or carers and a pupil, for that pupil to change school or educational programme under controlled circumstances' (Child Law Advice, 2020). It has been described by Done and Knowler (2019: 517) as the legitimising of an exclusionary process by government and one in which parents or carers are at risk of being pressurised by schools into endorsing such a move. It is, as yet, unclear how such practices will be affected under COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown conditions. These practices remain a concern as pupil anxiety, mental health and wellbeing concerns are balanced with academic 'catch up' which may conflict in the post-COVID-19 educational landscape (Daniels *et al.,* 2020: DfE, 2020b; Education Policy Institute, 2020:4).

Inequities

With regard to school-based provision, SENCos have been part of the team of professionals responsible for enacting 'reasonable endeavours' and completing COVID-19 risk assessments for pupils with SEND to ensure suitable access to education during the pandemic and full opening of schools in September 2020 (DfE, 2020b; Wedell, 2020:258). Professionals in schools have received regular guidance with updates from the Department for Education. John Coughlan, CEO of Hampshire County Council, reports that prior to the 22nd July 2020, approximately two hundred pieces of guidance had been released to schools, which was considered to be onerous for those working in Education (House of Commons Education Committee, 22nd July 2020, HC254, Q930). The Department for Education has shown some awareness of the inequalities highlighted by the pandemic, including measures such as allocating laptops and mobile internet connections to 'disadvantaged pupils' (DfE, 2020d). Notably, this group of pupils disproportionately includes pupils with SEND who are more likely to be eligible for free school meals (Shaw *et al.,* 2016:17; DfE & ONS, 2018:9). It should be noted that, at the time of writing, research is continually emerging about the educational impact the COVID-19 pandemic on children, young people and their families, including those with SEND who may have been disproportionately affected. This also applies

to the adaptations that may have been made by Local Authorities and other education professionals.

SENCo role

When further considering the role that SENCos may have in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to recognise that their role was problematized prior to this and questions raised about how the work of the SENCo is defined (Pearson, Mitchell & Rapti, 2015; Esposito & Carroll, 2019; Done, Murphy & Bedford, 2016). More recently, Hallett and Hallett (2020) have questioned the usefulness of the SENCo role now that all class teachers are responsible for all children in their classes (Department for Education & Department of Health (DfE & DoH, 2015). The specific relationship between SENCos and education policy is widely researched, with Dobson (2019) indicating that this relationship began with the first Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfE, 1994). Subsequently, the role has developed and been influenced by government, research, schools and those working in special educational needs (Dobson, 2019:445). Indeed, Pearson, Mitchell and Rapti (2015) identify a shift in language when referring to the role of the SENCo from management terms such as 'supervising' to terms relating to strategic leadership such as 'school culture' in subsequent Special Educational Needs Code of Practice policies (DfE, 2001; Training and Development Agency, 2009:2-4; Pearson, Mitchell & Rapti, 2015:55).

Workload

Despite this development in professional understanding of the role, the role is multifaceted; Kearns found that SENCos adopt multiple, sometimes concurrent, approaches or roles, including, arbiter, rescuer, auditor, collaborator and expert (2005:138-145). This supports the view that the SENCo role is particularly complex, creating particular difficulties for those in the role (Esposito & Carroll, 2019:6; Smith & Broomhead, 2019:55). Pragmatic issues including a lack of appropriate time to undertake the tasks demanded by the role are evident in the relevant literature with studies highlighting how SENCos feel this restricts them from carrying out their role effectively (Done, Murphy & Bedford, 2016; Boesley & Crane, 2018:37; Curran *et al.,* 2018:6). These time pressures often result from the SENCo role being held by someone who also has class teaching responsibilities (Dobson, 2019:456-457; Smith & Broomhead, 2019:55). Furthermore, subsequent SEND Codes of Practice have been criticised for their ambiguity around 'sufficient time' for SENCos to complete duties which 'may include' a variety of ever-changing aspects relating to the role (DfE & DoH, 2015:108-109; Smith & Broomhead, 2019:56; Dobson & Douglas, 2020:300). Subsequently, research has recommended that statutory time should be introduced for those working as SENCos, which may work in conjunction with the Department for Education's 'Recruitment and Retention Strategy' which involves reducing teacher workload (Esposito & Carroll, 2019:7; Curran *et al.,* 2018:7; DfE, 2019).

Parental involvement

An aspect of SENCos' responsibilities which has developed in response to the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) is that of liaising with parents and collaborating with them to support their child through appropriate educational provision (Kearns, 2005; Maher, 2016; Dobson & Douglas, 2020:301). The relationship between SENCos and parents has been considered by Maher (2016) who discusses the unique power dynamic whereby decisions about a child's provision are carefully negotiated, with some SENCOs able to

exercise greater professional judgement than others. In particular, the SENCOs interviewed by Maher (2016) stressed the importance of maintaining an honest, supportive and collaborative dialogue with parents in order to ensure that pupils' needs would be regularly evaluated and met (Maher, 2016:11; Boesley & Crane, 2018:39; Esposito & Carroll, 2019:7). However, the strength of parent and SENCo relationships may be strained for those SENCos who work part-time as the opportunities for regular meetings to discuss the child's needs are limited (Dobson, 2019:457).

With regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, SENCos may have to liaise with parents who have had negative experiences of accessing school-based provision during lockdown and may be considering home education alternatives as has been apparent in recent years (Maxwell *et al.,* 2020:433). Notably, prior research has identified the growing trend in home education with parents citing a lack of support, provision not deemed to be inclusive, and concerns over their child's mental health and wellbeing. It has subsequently been suggested that the notion of parents as consumers through school choice is a myth for those with children with SEN (Parsons & Lewis, 2010:83; Kendall & Taylor, 2016:299; Children's Commissioner, 2019:7; O'Connell, 2019).

Perceived status

Additionally, the role of the SENCo as an 'expert' who provides advice to both parents and other professionals is evidenced, despite SENCos not always identifying themselves as such (Kearns, 2005; Norwich, 2010:43; Smith & Broomhead, 2019:56) and the latest SEND Code of Practice emphasising their strategic whole school role (DfE & DoH, 2015). In relation to this, 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 SEND and the statutory processes associated with the SENCo role (Passy *et al.,* 2017:30; Dobson, 2019:460; Esposito & Carroll, 2019:7). The requirement for the SENCo to hold the NASENCO award within three years of commencing the role (Done, Murphy & Knowler, 2015) also contributes to the 'expert' status amongst staff and parents (MacKenzie, 2007:213; NASUWT, 2018:24; Smith & Broomhead, 2019:56). Additionally, SENCos are expected to provide expertise that can support teachers in their statutory duty to be responsible and accountable for the progress of their pupils with SEND as reinforced in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015). However, Done, Murphy & Bedford (2016:14) found their sample of SENCos who had completed the NASENCO award were more likely to complete whole-school organisational responsibilities. 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 (Pearson, Mitchell & Rapti*,* 2015:49; Maher & Vickerman, 2018:18; Wharton *et al.*, 2020:4).

Despite the 'expert' role which SENCos may be identified with by school colleagues, the associated status is unclear and inconsistent (Curran, Mortimore, & Riddell, 2017; Pulsford, 2019:2). The role of the SENCo within senior leadership teams has been problematised through research outlining several complexities. Firstly, policy recommendations, including the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee (2006), and subsequent SEND Codes of Practice, including the current statutory version (DfE & DoH, 2015), explicitly suggest or infer that Serco's should hold a situational and organisation leadership position in order to ensure that an inclusive school culture is generated and sustained (Done, Murphy & Watt, 2017:282; Esposito & Carroll, 2019:2). Notably, Coleman (2020:73) identified that a SENCo's position within a senior leadership

team was indicative of a school's commitment to inclusive values and practices, and to sustaining an inclusive school culture. Despite this, studies have found that not all SENCos are placed within senior management teams, thereby restricting their ability to undertake a strategic or organisational role where whole school practices can be influenced (Pearson, Mitchell & Rapti, 2015:48). Consequently, this inconsistency suggests that the SENCo role will be interpreted differently depending on how the role is defined in relation to school context, leading to their work being measured against varying professional standards alongside the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) (Dobson, 2019:460).

Tensions

Pulsford (2019:2) argues that the SENCo role typically becomes that of middle leadership, forcing SENCos to balance both managerial and leadership aspects relating to inclusive practice in schools. Examples of management related duties which have been increasingly evidenced in SENCos' work include performance management of staff and the distribution of resources such as the deployment of teaching assistants (Tissot, 2013:34; Pearson, Mitchell & Rapti, 2015:50). Thus, my application of the word 'managerial' focuses on statutory and administrative tasks. Done and Murphy (2016:144-145) consider how this middle tier role contradicts the designation of SENCos as 'agents of change'. Increasingly, bureaucratic elements of accountability and responsibility are carefully balanced to ensure pupils access inclusive education provision (Done, Murphy & Done, 2017:284; NASUWT, 2018:10; Pulsford, 2019). By extension, some SENCos have reported feelings of isolation as they balance both practical or bureaucratic managerial and leadership responsibilities, and fear that a senior leadership position would disconnect them from assessing the impact of inclusive practice on a day-to-day basis (Curran, 2019:85; Smith & Broomhead, 2019:57). Hence, the complexities associated with balancing both managerial and leadership responsibilities, as reinforced through statutory policy, suggests that the SENCo role is diverse and evolving depending on the individual motives of SENCos to ensure inclusive practices are at the core of teaching and learning in schools (Pulsford, 2019:2) and on the school context.

With regard to the role of the SENCo during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that both managerial and leadership responsibilities will need to be carefully balanced (Pearson, Mitchell & Rapti, 2015:48; Pulsford, 2019:1). Managerial aspects will now include the completion of COVID-19 risk assessment for pupils with SEND as previously mentioned and leadership aspects related to impact assessment and external scrutiny (Wedell, 2020). Furthermore, the NASENCO award learning outcomes do not currently include specific mention of training in emergency or crisis planning but, instead, is concerned with the planning, implementation and continual review of SEN provision (NCTL, 2014:7-8). Questions are, consequently, raised as to whether SENCos, with their postgraduate level training, will be adequately utilised as a resource to support COVID-19 school planning. Additionally, the level of SENCo involvement in the allocation of resources, including laptops as previously mentioned, is unclear. Furthermore, in seeking to facilitate inclusion within these existing tensions, SENCos may also act primarily as advocates for young people with SEND and their families, with Rosen-Webb (2011:165-166) identifying that SENCos may not identify themselves as 'altruistic', whilst their experiences clearly evidence a value base of actively caring and acting in the best interests of others; this is also true of Kearns (2005) pupil-centred 'rescuer' SENCo definition. The role of the school SENCo should therefore be considered in relation to actions taken during the pandemic and lockdown, and when preparing the school community for post-pandemic conditions to ensure

that all pupils receive appropriate and inclusive provision (either through distance learning or in the classroom) (Daniels *et al.,* 2020:7; Wedell, 2020).

Complexity

Pupils with SEND have experienced educational disparities during the initial lockdown period and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Disabled Children's Partnership (2020; House of Commons Education Committee, 1st July 2020, HC 254, Q690). Department for Education advice has focussed on pupils with SEND being risk assessed both prior to returning to partially opened schools during the lockdown and during the full opening of schools in September 2020 (DfE, 2020a). This ever-changing guidance has been provided to school leadership teams who have had to react rapidly whilst balancing the needs of their diverse school communities and the emerging needs of all pupils (Wedell, 2020:258). Historically, SEND Codes of Practice have incorrectly assumed that the statutory school SENCo will be within the school leadership team and, therefore, able to fulfil a strategic whole-school leadership role (Pearson, Mitchell & Rapti*,* 2015:48; Done, Murphy & Bedford, 2016; Dobson, 2019:445). Despite policy indicating that the role is primarily strategic, managerial aspects must often be carefully balanced with leadership responsibilities to ensure school practice and policy work towards providing an inclusive education for pupils with SEND (Pulsford, 2019:2). Hence, the statutory description of the SENCo role differs significantly from its execution in practice settings where pragmatic factors, including a lack of time and resources, are significant pressures for SENCos (Boesley & Crane, 2018:37; Esposito & Carroll, 2019:7; Dobson & Douglas, 2020:300). The SENCo role is complex and defined by bureaucratic practices which can affect the self-efficacy of these postgraduate level professionals (Passy *et al.,* 2017:30; Smith & Broomhead, 2019:57).

Conclusions

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, several lines of enquiry relating to school SENCos are emerging. Existing studies on exclusion already suggest that pupils with SEND are more likely to be excluded but, by focusing on the multiplier effect of inter-related school, home and societal factors, and balancing these with individual pupils needs, unlawful exclusions could be prevented (Gill *et al.,* 2017; Graham *et al.,* 2019:25; Timpson, 2019:54). Nevertheless, during the lockdown period and following the COVID-19 pandemic, Daniels *et al.* (2020) suggest that pupils with SEND, with and without statutory provision, may not have adequate access to education and their complex needs may make school reintegration challenging (Education Policy Institute, 2020:4). Prior research, combined with these pandemic-related findings, suggests that SENCos will confront unique circumstances as pupils' statutory provision and needs must be delicately balanced with school requirements (as dictated in government guidance) and subsequent pressures (Daniels *et al.,* 2020:2; Wharton *et al.*, 2020:4). Furthermore, if, as research suggests, not all SENCos are members of school senior leadership teams, their ability to be change agents is questionable (Done, Murphy & Watt, 2017:284). The capacity of such SENCos to represent the experiences of pupils with SEND and their families and take these into account when creating whole-school COVID-19 contingency planning will be limited. Additionally, the SENCo's relationship with parents may also require rebuilding following a breakdown of trust resulting from parents receiving minimal additional support during the lockdown period (Kearns, 2005; Maher, 2016:11; Maxwell *et al.,* 2020:433).

Significantly, existing pressures on SENCos experience around time, workload, the exact remit and status of their role may be exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly through the process of risk assessing all pupils with EHCPs prior to full opening in September 2020 (Pearson, Mitchell & Rapti, 2015:48; Weddell, 2020). This suggests that, in response to the pandemic, the SENCo role will involve an increasing number of managerial and administrative aspects with limited capacity to ensure inclusive policy and practice is being implemented at a whole-school level (Curran, 2019:85; Smith & Broomhead, 2019:57). If the SENCo role adapts to the point where whole-school leadership aspects such as school culture are viewed as less important following the COVID-19 pandemic, then questions may be raised as to who will advocate for pupils with SEND and ensure that they experience an inclusive education (Done, Murphy & Watt, 2017:282; Esposito & Carroll, 2019:2).

In summary, if the school is taken to be a 'microcosm of society', measures such as social distancing, increased hygiene measures and temporary targeted lockdowns will acutely reflect the 'new normal' of our current COVID-19 society (Graham *et al.,* 2019:6). Initial research has begun to question how education professionals will balance these new challenges, which will compete with existing pressures, and may cause exclusionary practices to increase (Daniels *et al.,* 2020; Done & Knowler, 2020; Viner *et al.,* 2020). For pupils with SEND, it is how professionals such as SENCos manage these pressures and prevent this group of pupils becoming increasingly marginalised in school communities and socially that matters (Graham *et al.,* 2019:96; Lee, 2020).

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