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Unchartered Territory and Extraordinary Times……the SENCO's experiences of leading SEN during a pandemic in England.

Abstract

This research focuses on the impact of the context of Covid-19 on the role of the SENCO in English schools. The SENCO role is a contested field; however, the current Special Educational Needs Code of Practice identifies eleven key areas of SENCO work. A widely distributed survey was used to gather the voice of SENCOs across the country, with 26 responses. Data were analysed using a Realistic Evaluation framework to identify the impact of Covid-19 on the work of the SENCO. The research identified that practice during the context had changed in some key areas and also identified three new factors of the SENCO role. These point to the need to revise policy and guidance relating to the SENCO being part of SLT, providing emotional support for adults and engaging in practical pedagogical activities.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Unchartered Territory and Extraordinary Times……the SENCO's experiences of leading SEN during a pandemic in England.

Introduction

The work of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in England is an area of ongoing discussion within the context of a Special Educational Needs (SEN) system that has recently been widely critiqued as not being fit for purpose. The SENCO is a qualified teacher who holds responsibility within a school for leading and coordinating the provision for pupils with SEN (Department for Education [DfE] 2015), which is acknowledged to be a complex role (Wearmouth, 2016). This role has been a statutory requirement for mainstream government funded schools for more than 20 years (Curran, 2020, p.6). This research sought to understand the impact of Covid-19 on the work of the SENCO and adds to the wider debates about the SENCO's role and workload.

On 23rd March 2020, as a result of Covid-19 restrictions, schools in the UK were widely viewed as closing. However, most schools remained operational, both providing online learning opportunities and in-school provision for children of key workers and those fitting the government's 'vulnerable' category.

The extraordinary impact of Covid-19 in 2020 has affected health, liberty and economic circumstances for very many people (Children's Society, 2020, p.4). This has included education, with millions of children and young people across the world being out of school (UNESCO, 2020). Within the UK, many pupils were educated at home for up to 6 months (Children's Society, 2020), whilst school staff worked in schools and from home to provide learning activities and manage their own caring responsibilities. This included SENCOs continuing their role as strategic leaders of SEN within the unchartered territory of coordinating SEN provision during a pandemic lockdown. This context has highlighted issues regarding pupil mental health, wellbeing and progress, whilst in relation to provision for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), the issues include: implications of the relaxation of SEN duties, and variability in the amount and differentiation of learning activities and support.

This research was conducted during May and June 2020 when the lockdown situation had been in place for approximately 2 months, thus the participants had developed patterns of working to reflect and report upon. Within the SENCO responses, learners were referred to as pupils, as such this terminology is used throughout the paper. The term 'parents' is used to include carers with parental responsibility and 'governor' to refer to both governors and other voluntary governance positions, such as trustees. The current statutory guidance for practice for SEN has SEND included within its title and employs the term SEN throughout the document. In accordance with this, the term SEN is used unless reference is being made to the statutory guidance document.

Literature Review

The SENCO is identified within the SEND Code of Practice [CoP] as the person within a school or setting who holds responsibility for the coordination of day-to-day operationalisation of the SEN policy, provision and practice for pupils identified with SEN, including those with Education, Health and Care Plans [EHCPs] (DfE and DoH, 2015 6.88, p.108).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

SENCOs therefore need to reflect upon how they balance the many obligations of their role (Soan, 2017).

The review of literature in relation to the SENCO's role was conducted inductively and has been structured through the themes that emerged. The rationale for this decision was that these themes offer exploration of how the key responsibilities identified by the SEND CoP (DfE and DoH, 2015) [table 1] are operationalised in practice.

SENCO: an evolving and complex role

The SENCO's role originated within the first Special Educational Needs CoP (DfE, 1994) and has been recognised as having metamorphosised over time (Cowne, Frankl and Gerschel, 2019). It has seen a paradigm shift over 25 years from a focus on pedagogy and support for learners to that of strategic leader (Ekins, 2015). Indeed, the SEND CoP (DfE and DoH, 2015, 6.87 and 6.91) links the word strategic to the SENCO in several places, for example, identifying that the SENCO has a key role to play in 'determining the strategic development

of SEN policy and that schools should resource the SENCO role 'in a similar way to other important strategic roles within a school. This evolving role means that the SENCO is situated within a 'wicked' problem (Middleton, 2019), at the epicentre of the tensions between standards and accountability, and inclusion (Cowne, Frankl and Gerschel, 2019).

Underlying the complex and challenging role of the SENCO (Bartram, 2018; Wearmouth, 2016) is the number and range of responsibilities within the role. Indeed, the demands of the workload, poverty of time and funding, are identified by SENCOs as negatively impacting their capacity to fulfil the role effectively (Curran *et al.*, 2018, 2020; NAO, 2019). The complexity of the role is further influenced by diverse situational factors, including the size and key stages of the school, geographical location, number of pupils identified with SEN, other responsibilities allocated to the SENCO, and the cultural values and beliefs of the school or setting (Cowne, Frankl and Gerschel, 2019), as decided by the contextual leadership and governance (Packer, 2015). The combination of strategic operational leadership is essential to the SENCO role and these discrete components of the role need to be carefully balanced (Soan, 2017).

SENCO: Strategic Leader for SEN and developing a whole school culture.

Effective leadership and provision for SEN is facilitated through whole school ownership of SEND (Boddison, 2018). Thus, the understanding that individual practitioners each hold about their responsibilities for pupils with SEN, and whether there is a shared agreement of the specific responsibilities of the SENCO role, act as barriers or facilitators to developing effective practice (Garner, 2018; Ekins, 2015). Vital determinants for whole school ownership are where the SENCO is a member of the SLT, and where the SLT are resolute in their focus upon inclusive practice and empowering Continued Professional Development [CPD] (Garner, 2018). However, many SENCOs do not hold a senior leadership position in their school or setting (Curran *et al.*, 2018).

The CoP (DfE and DoH, 2015 6.3 p.92) requires schools to have an identified governor or sub-committee tasked to oversee the school's SEN provision, however scrutiny of the CoP indicates an implicit assumption of governorship in the context of Local Authority maintained schools and fails to reflect the diversity of school governance arrangements. The SENCO needs to be able to effectively work with the Governor / Trustee who holds

responsibility for SEN (Soan, 2017; Packer, 2015); this is a reciprocal responsibility in that SENCO and Governor need to be committed to working collaboratively for the benefit of pupils with SEN. However, effective and regular work with the Governor for SEN can be a challenge (Soan, 2017).

SENCO: Leading colleagues and building capacity.

The SENCO plays an instrumental role within accountability for the progress and quality of learning and teaching for pupils with SEN (Packer, 2015). This indicates the importance of school monitoring systems and procedures that include SEN, rather than monitoring of SEN being a separate discrete set of processes, which adds to the argument for the SENCO being a member of the SLT (Glazzard *et al.*, 2015).

The SENCO has a part to play within auditing practitioners' knowledge and skills, and strengthening teachers' knowledge, understanding and competences for managing diverse learning needs (Cowne, Frankl and Gerschel, 2019), and also planning for CPD (Soan, 2017). This should include proactively appraising and addressing their own CPD needs (Cowne, Frankl and Gerschel, 2019; Packer, 2015).

SENCO: working in partnership and acting as advocate.

Working collaboratively in partnership with pupils, parents and external agencies is advocated within the SEND CoP (DfE and DoH, 2015), as is the importance of holding the pupil and their parents at the centre of decision-making processes (Hellawell, 2019). Effective partnership working, whilst complex and challenging, is vital to support the Graduated Approach and develop deep understanding of pupils' profiles and provide high quality provision for them (Packer, 2015). The graduated approach is a model of practice for supporting effectual practice for meeting the needs of pupils with SEN, through a four-part cycle of assess, plan, do and review (DfE 2015, 5.38; 6.44; p.280). SENCOs need a range of approaches and resources to support listening to pupils with SEN's views of their learning and aspirations, whilst being reflective and mindful of the ethics of care within their work (Halliwell, 2019; Glazzard *et al*., 2015).

SENCO: management and administration and deployment of resources

Permeating all the aspects of the SENCO role is the need for accomplished communication and organisation competences (Cowne, Frankl and Gerschel, 2019), not least to support the managerial and administrative aspects of the role. Curran *et al.'s* (2018, p.13) research identified that 71% of SENCOs stated that administrative tasks were the tasks that absorbed most of SENCO time, with meetings ranking as the second most time-consuming element of their role.

SENCOs need to have a cogent appreciation of accountability, the available resource (human and physical) and tactics for effective and efficient deployment of those resources to meet the needs of learners with SEN (Wearmouth, 2016; Blatchford Russell and Webster, 2012). This highlights the importance of analysing and understanding data and of advocating for pupils with SEN when reviewing pupil progress and planning approaches (Soan, 2017). There are synergies here with the issues that have been highlighted in relation to the administrative tasks that consume the greater proportion of a SENCo's time. Effective management and deployment of resources to ensure positive outcomes for learners with SEN and value for money supports the strategic dimension of the role of SENCO (Bartram 2018) and thus requires time for this work.

Soan (2017, p.16) contends that "SENCOs are to be considered a point of contact or advisor, rather than the professional who has the responsibility to carry out the actions alone." The review of the literature demonstrates the complexity and multifaceted nature of the role and the wider responsibilities of the community of the school or setting.

This is keenly a time when there is especially a need for clarity of roles and responsibilities and shared ownership for responsibility for SEN.

Paradigm and Methodology

Paradigm diversity (Denzin, 2008), epistemological pluralism and the view that both qualitative and quantitative methods share many commonalities (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004), has led the researchers to the philosophical position of realism (Linsley, 2019) or pragmatism (Mertens, 2015). The researchers are aiming to generate

understanding of practice (Biesta, 2020) in the world of the SENCO within a particular context and a methodological bilingualism (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003), using quantifying data in combination with qualifying data. The survey questions (see appendix 1), were designed to understand the impact of Covid-19 on the enactment of the SENCO role as defined by the in the COP.

In consideration of the changed working practice of schoolteachers during the Covid-19 period and being cognisant of the increased workload which had resulted, the researchers decided against interviewing in favour of an extended questionnaire approach. The draft questionnaire was piloted by a SENCO prior to further revisions and the final version (available from the authors). A link to the online questionnaire, using Online Surveys, was circulated to SENCOs via the SENCO Forum, twitter and SENCO-centred web pages in combination with a snowball approach through existing SENCO contacts. A total of 26 surveys were completed by SENCOs, 14 of whom were from primary settings, 9 from secondary and 3 from other settings.

An ethical approach was adopted through reference to the BERA (2018) guidance and ethical approval was provided through the researchers' university Research Ethics Panel. Informed consent was provided by participants whose identity was anonymised automatically by the online survey.

The data analysis approach, coming from the ontological framework of realism, employed Realistic Evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Realistic Evaluation was developed to examine "human service practice" (Kazi, 2003 p.35) and reflects upon implicit theories within programs (Linsley, 2019) whilst keeping context as an important element of the reflection. For this research, the SENCO role is identified as the program and the outline of the SENCO role in the SEN Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) is the core theory interrogated (Pawson and Tilley, 2004). The Realistic Evaluation methodology is concerned with social change (Tilley, 2000) and asks "what works for whom in what circumstances and in what respects, and how?" (Pawson and Tilley, 2004 p.2). Within this research the 'circumstances' are the context of the Spring to Summer 2020 period of 'Covid-19 lockdown' in England, and the 'whom' is the SENCO. The data analysis approach of the Realistic

Evaluation framework is to identify Context, Mechanism and Outcome (CMO) (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), which are identified in Table 2.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Using this framework, the first stage of analysis was to code responses according to CMO (Jackson and Kolla, 2012). Stage 2 of the analysis was split into 2 parts. Part 1 considered those data coded as 'Mechanism', thematically analysing them using a deductive approach, adopting the theoretical themes of the role of the SENCO from the SEN Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015), and supplementing these with any emergent themes. Part 2 considered those data coded as 'Outcome', thematically analysing them using an inductive approach. The approach to thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Wilkinson (2011 cited in Silverman, 2020), used a constant comparative approach (Fram, 2013) with familiarisation of the data through repeated reading (Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault, 2015) of the responses. This manual approach enabled an enhanced credibility of the analysis through triangulation between the two researchers.

Findings: Mechanism

Using a deductive approach, the Mechanism of the SENCO role was analysed using the eleven themes from the CofP (see Table 1), however additional Mechanisms emerged through the analysis, reflecting the changing responsibilities in practice when leading SEN provision. The frequency of these Mechanisms provides a snapshot of the SENCOs' key leadership responsibilities during this context.

Mechanisms from the CoP

Within the participant responses relating to contextual leadership of SEN, the eleven themes of the SENCO were all represented. The frequency of these themes was not uniform, with most of the SENCO workload being taken up by mechanisms a, b, d and g. In contrast, mechanisms f, I, j and k were only mentioned once respectively. It is, however, suggested that responsibility k (record keeping) was omitted from many SENCO responses because it is almost an automatic task which SENCOs may have overlooked to mention.

Emergent Mechanisms (not in the CoP)

Three additional responsibilities emerged, two of which had a higher frequency, coded as:

m (n7): 'practical administrative and teaching activities', illustrated by; *'individualised learner profiles and assessment of new cohorts in September….' and 'completing reams of paperwork for the LA….'*

n (n7): 'providing emotional support to staff, pupils and their families' illustrated by; '*supporting the wellbeing of the leadership team and my other colleagues….'*

and the third, referred to less frequently,

L (n2): 'working with senior leaders and governors to strategically develop SEN practice'.

These three emergent responsibilities are not explicit within the eleven CoP themes (table 1). Whilst the SENCO role of working strategically beyond the responsibilities related to the Equality Act is specifically outlined in section 6.87 (DfE and DoH, 2015), there is little or no recognition of the need to provide emotional support to practitioners, pupils and their families. Also missing are the additional practical and teaching responsibilities that a SENCO is frequently required to take on.

Findings about Outcomes

Workload and Administration

SENCOs listed many activities that were administrative, including attending meetings and completing paperwork for the local authority. This seems to be consistent with the National SENCO workload surveys (Curran *et al.,* 2018, 2020) findings about administrative tasks. The activities identified as increasing in this context included meetings being convened through online means rather than face-to-face and additional tasks including completing Covid-19 related risk assessments, additional reporting, and learning to manage online meetings '*.... it means the spinning of many plates. Highly demanding and incredibly intense role.'*

SENCOs (n5) indicated that they had teaching responsibilities that included in-school and online teaching, and creating pupil resources for both school and home use. This suggests that a focus upon pedagogy and support through working directly with pupils with SEN

remains part of their responsibilities. The focus on a pedagogical role harkens back to an earlier protype of the SENCO role that placed emphasis on the SENCO as learning or support teacher for those pupils with SEN, captured through terms such as *remedial teacher*. While this offers divergence from the literature's reconceptualization of the SENCO role, it may be that SENCOs have stepped into the breach to fulfil roles needed within school owing to contextual challenges. However, it should be acknowledged that many SENCOs do have other responsibilities, including teaching responsibilities that influence the amount of time available to draw upon for the SENCO role, which in turn influences the implementation of strategic and operational aspects of the role (Curran *et al.*, 2018, 2020). The potential of a move towards a focus or emphasis within the SENCO role upon pedagogy and support, rather than strategic leadership, should be monitored carefully beyond the pandemic to identify whether there is a trend to be concerned about.

Providing Emotional Support to staff, pupils and their families

SENCOs (n6) indicated that they were supporting the emotional wellbeing of their SLT and colleagues, pupils and families. Support was provided through wellbeing packs and newsletters for pupils and families, wellbeing webinars for colleagues and organising regular contact with everyone. SENCOs reported that safeguarding was a high concern during this context and regular liaison with the DSL took place.

The majority of responses about issues raised by pupils with SEN or their parents related to parental concerns. Half of the respondents identified the challenge of successful home learning and concerns about their children's Social Emotional and Mental Health, frequently related to anxiety and return to school. Just under a quarter cited concerns about managing children's behaviour at home, about the appropriateness of work that was sent home for their children and about home IT resources not enabling schoolwork to be fully accessed. This response:

> "*Parents feeling inadequate, children refusing to complete learning tasks, behaviour challenges.*"

has clear implications for the outcome of providing emotional and practical support to parents and offers evidence for the complex and challenging nature of the work SENCOs engage in, in support of parents and pupils (Packer, 2015), particularly within this context.

Working with senior leaders and governors to strategically develop SEN practice

The survey identified that the SEN Governor's own external professional responsibilities negatively impacted upon regularity of communication:

'*her job is very challenging at this time'*

'she is the head of a local primary so I guess she has other things to worry about!!'

Most respondents (n19) reported that they had had no contact with the SEN Governor. A small number (n2) indicated regular contact via telephone or online meeting. The focus of communication was to discuss EHCP reviews and report upon numbers and the provision for pupils with SEN. The context has added to the challenges of developing effectual partnerships SEN Governors and SENCOs (Soan, 2017), which is of concern owing to the important role such partnerships play within strategic leadership of SEN (Soan, 2017; Packer, 2015),

Senior and middle leaders were seen as a significant source of support for SENCOs in this context. Those SENCOs who identified that they held an SLT role (n15) reported time pressures, an increased workload and challenges including an expectation of adopting wider responsibilities, such as managing staffing and monitoring attendance. Concordant with the importance of SENCOs being part of SLT (Cowne, Frankl and Gerschel, 2019; Packer, 2015), the direct influence of holding a position with SLT was reported to have a positive effect upon their SENCO responsibilities, with contributing factors including frequent communication, good working relationships and an ethos of care:

'Although the work load has increased I'm glad to be on SLT as it ensures I'm involved in conversations and party to information that impacts on the children and families I work with.'

'I can also make sure SEN is considered in all decision making and I have clout within the school'

Communication

Communication with senior leaders

When reporting on access to their senior leaders in this context the majority (n22) were positive, whilst a small number (n4) reported a negative experience, two of whom reported no access to their SLT.

Communication with colleagues

The importance of dialogue between the SENCO and the school team(s) was highlighted by participants, evidencing the importance of positive working relationships to sustain a long-term support strategy for pupils with SEN (Buck, 2018), not least within this context. Communication between SENCOs and their colleagues were conducted at very regular intervals, often weekly, via a variety of modes: email, telephone and online platforms.

Communication with parents and pupils

In spite of this activity not being recognised as something significant within their workload, SENCOs (n10) identified that they were engaging in regular communication with parents of pupils with SEN to

> '*ensure parents are confident and happy to support home learning and understand their role when pupil has EHCP*'

SENCOs employed a variety of modes of communication, including emails, telephone and online meetings. When asked about specific difficulties relating to communication with parents, just over one third of SENCOs identified a general issue of parents not responding to attempts to communicate or very delayed responses. SENCOs (n10) identified their positive relationships with pupils and families acted as a facilitator. It is suggested that where SENCOs included these positive relationships within the mechanism of their role, the outcome within this context was improved, concurring with Hellawell (2019) and Packer (2015). Three SENCOs also highlighted the home language of the parents being a barrier, which could also be considered a key issue not specific to this context, but rather relating to an inclusive approach to mechanism f: liaising with parents.

Communication with external agencies

SENCOs (n8) reported that they worked to maintain regular communication with external agencies to ensure their engagement with pupils with SEN, generally facilitated through online meetings. Educational Psychologists were identified as a significant support for SENCOs (n5) during this context. However, the success of maintaining contact with the range of external professionals was reported as being difficult for many. In concurrence with

Soan's (2017, p.16) notion of being a 'point of contact', SENCOs acted as a conduit for information sharing between external sources (parents, external agencies) and school colleagues.

On the understanding that their experience of communication from the DfE would have had a direct impact on their ability to advise and lead on operational matters, SENCOs were asked their views. Of the twenty-six respondents, all but one, who stated that it was satisfactory, gave a negative view. Criticisms were that there were too many communications, that it was poorly timed, and that information was confusing, inconsistent and contradictory.

> "*Comes after national briefing as an after thought*"
>
> *"Very frequent, released at all sorts of hours in the day - all notifications require processing quickly and parents informed to minimise the 'rumour train'"*

These responses imply the outcome that SENCOs needed to manage the communication related to the DfE guidance and its implications within a limited timescale.

Responses about Local Authority communications provided eight positive comments, with some criticism relating to confusing information and poor timing. Additional views identified that communication was insufficient and neglected to consider SEND and SENCOs. There were reports of inconsistency between different Local authorities and different internal departments. There have been challenges for SENCOs in seeking support from local authorities prior to the pandemic (Curran, Mortimore and Ridell, 2017). The reductions to local authority budgets have amplified pressures in local authority support services and systems, and upon the allocation of resources to support pupils with SEN (Cowne, Frankl and Gerscel, 2019). SENCO views in this research suggest that tensions and issues arising from the circumstances of the pandemic may have accentuated the pre-existing frailties in the system, although this research draws upon a small sample and thus cannot be generalised across all local areas.

Pupils with SEMH needs

Providing support to pupils for SEMH needs was highlighted as a significant need in this context. The most common approach (n12) was regular individual contact with those pupils, via phone, online or home visits, usually by the SENCO or other non-teaching staff. Just under one third of respondents (n7) provided specific resources for use at home and the same number (n7) also referred pupils to professional services to support SEMH needs. Six respondents stated that pupils with these specific needs had been invited to attend school. It should be noted that there was recognition that for some pupils SEMH needs had diminished as a consequence of home-learning.

Monitoring and Coordinating provision

The words *planning* and *support* featured heavily, but the overall approach of SENCOs to this mechanism is captured by the response that SENCOs were:

'ensuring that pupils with SEN are not forgotten'

The word *ensuring* had high prevalence within responses concerning this mechanism, which is suggestive of the monitoring and quality assurance aspect to their role (Glazzard *et al*., 2015) and supportive of their vital role within supporting positive changes to practice (Cowne, Frankl and Gerscel, 2019). SENCOs' monitoring activities included checking that home learning activities were accessible for pupils and that there was regular communication between school staff and families. SENCOs employed a variety of modes to conduct monitoring of provision within this context. This included emails, telephone and online meetings and developing a questionnaire for colleagues and pupils to complete. Within this SENCOs drew on other sources of evidence, for example,

'*TAs conversations with children and parents have been crucial'.*

The frequency of monitoring activities was reported to be weekly, but this often involved the SENCO in multiple meetings across a week. Monitoring activities informed the furnishing of resources or additional online teaching.

Annual Reviews [AR] were the key focus for SENCOs' records in this context. Where ARs were held, they were conducted online, however SENCOs reported using a combination of synchronous and asynchronous methods to creatively manage the technical challenges presented, via telephone and online meetings as well as written contributions.

The difficulties of connectivity were reported upon:

> *'Just one* [AR]*, difficult as rural broadband made video calls impossible, phone calls, paperwork shared more calls.'*

One SENCO reported upon parental involvement with the AR process:

> *'Spoke to parents and, with their agreement, conducted an annual review. We completed form, she decided on any additions and we agreed to have an interim review once we have returned to make amendments to the EHCP'.*

Reasons for delays of ARs included advice from the LA,

> *'We took advice to defer them from LA initially and are trying to hold them before the end of term.'*

and concerns from parents about holding ARs via an online meeting.79% of SENCOs managed to complete ARs within this context.

Empowering themselves and others

Responses identified that SENCOs (n25) supported their colleagues with planning learning and teaching for remote learning activities for pupils with SEN and advice regarding resources, for specific pupils, including collating lists of resources and links to online materials and also planning collaboratively with colleagues. SENCOs (n8) supported parents in their new pedagogical role owing to the remote learning situation, responding to direct requests to support from parents, and by delivering learning packs to vulnerable children.

SENCOs (n6) provided feedback to their colleagues regarding the effectiveness of remote learning activities. This suggests that there are synergies between the SENCOs advisory and monitoring responsibilities. The challenge of differentiation of work emerged, relating to parental concerns about the appropriateness of work. Differentiation as part of reducing barriers for pupils with SEN within learning and teaching activities, is regarded as being effectual to enable access to a broad curriculum and acknowledged to be multifaceted and challenging (Hellawell, 2019). The notion of differentiation has been subject to much debate and it may be that teaching approaches adopted within the online learning environment have reignited discussion about this pedagogical process. This implies an area for policy/guidance development relating to SENCO's responsibilities to build capacity of their

setting to proactively manage diverse learning needs of pupils with SEN (Cowne, Frankl and Gerschel, 2019).

CPD

Responses identified that SENCOs (n25) actively engaged in CPD activities to continue to develop their own professional knowledge and practice. A wide range of providers were identified, with CPD accessed via webinars, online modules, articles, blogs and videos. The majority of CPD opportunities accessed were free. A variety of topics were listed; most were linked to SEMH and behaviour (broadly and specific to Covid-19) and to the SENCO role. One SENCO reported on the positive value of IT training for working remotely.

The impact of the CPD was increased knowledge of policy and practice that informed planning and developing resources;

> *'Very useful to develop knowledge, invaluable during this situation'*
>
> *'Helped create direction on what needs to happen nex*t'

Responses identified that SENCOs used opportunities afforded by online CPD for networking and to support sharing information to facilitate involvement and mutual support from a *community of practice* (Boddison, 2018).

In concurrence their role within strengthening teachers' awareness and practice (Cowne, Frankl and Gershel, 2019), SENCOs (n4) also signposted or directed CPD opportunities for colleagues, for example:

> '*I created a padlet of 30+ courses Free CPD for my team*',

and directly organised CPD for colleagues. These SENCO-led CPD opportunities focused upon wellbeing for colleagues in addition to topics focused upon SEN and pedagogy. One SENCO reported that they had quality assured the CPD they recommended. Reviews of the CPD opportunities were overwhelmingly positive in terms of value and quality. SENCOs were appreciative of being able to fit these into their workload:

> '*Liked the fact that often a hr* [hour]*and free so can complete around other work'*

Transition

Respondents used 'transition' as a term to cover a wide range of changes for pupils, such as return to school and moving to a new year group.

Transition back to school

Individual contact with both pupils and their parents was a key tool within planning for pupils with SEN to transition back to schools, with several respondents identifying partnership working with parents.

> *"Conducted a survey with parents of children with EHCPs to identify if / when they feel it appropriate for their child to return to school."*

This suggests that, within this context, SENCOs continued to work collaboratively with parents as part of their graduated approach and to understand learners' needs (Packer, 2015). Resources including social stories and books, videos and photos were widely referred to. Some respondents reported working with external services and planning a curriculum with a focus on wellbeing, whilst the use of risk assessments was also identified as a part of the process in planning the return of pupils.

In relation to the return of pupils, the most reported concern (n19) was pupil anxiety and mental health needs, including loss, grief and trauma, as well as increases in domestic violence in the home. Further concerns included pupils having lost the habit of attending school (n7), experiencing difficulties separating from their parents (n7), and pupils not understanding or managing the need for additional Covid-19 measures and the associated changes in school routines (n3). Participants also reflected upon the implications of health and safety concerns on working closely with pupils, particularly those with needs for physical intervention for physiological and pedagogical needs. Concerns regarding a widened attainment gap for pupils with SEN were also articulated.

Transition to new schools

SENCOs described liaising with other schools and with parents to share information and learn about pupils with SEN, as a way of informing planning for transition. Transition activities and meetings were facilitated remotely, with phone meetings being most common.

Facilitators and Barriers to the SENCO role

Teamwork was identified as a key facilitator (n11), along with positive relationships and communication with pupils and families (n10). Support from Senior Leaders was highlighted

by six respondents, as was the use of technology, in particular virtual learning platforms and communication tools such as Zoom and Teams.

The barriers identified by SENCOs were much more diverse. The lack of time and changing guidance and expectations relating to Covid-19 were both identified by four SENCOs. The overwhelming nature of the context is expressed here:

> *"The DfE making sudden announcements and changing advice, differing expectations, balancing everyone's needs, staff understandably having other commitments and shielding, running a physical school of vulnerable students and an online one and supporting year 8 and year 11 transition and planning for year 10 to return. There just aren't enough hours in the day"*

Three SENCOs each cited barriers arising from the lack of parental engagement and contact with pupils. These SENCOs also highlighted barriers relating to issues with technology and the quality of communications when using technology:

> *"Lack of face to face - even with Teams [online meeting app], pupils miss this and can put on a defence/face more easily than in a physical meeting."*

Further barriers, mentioned by two SENCOs, included issues and delays with access to external professionals and reports and referrals. These SENCOs also highlighted concerns regarding the lack of support from their Local Authority and Senior Leaders and difficulties arising from staff absence due to Covid-19.

Conclusion

The practical outcomes of this context have been a greater combination of the use of technology to facilitate meetings and other communications, challenged by barriers relating to digital poverty. An increased concern for pupils and the consequences for their return to school in September emerged, relating to pupils learning, mental health and wellbeing and safeguarding, all of which were perceived to have augmented as an outcome of this context and contributed to an increase in SENCO Workload.

This research has identified some significant outcomes upon the enactment of the mechanism of the role of the SENCO within this context. Whilst the majority of SENCO time, was related to the mechanisms of overseeing and coordinating provision, advising

colleagues and liaising with other settings and external agencies, three factors that are a challenge to policy and guidance upon the role of the SENCO have been identified. Consideration of these three factors within the expected government prompted review of the SEN CoP would help to reflect the realistic enactment of the SENCO role.

Hands on work of the SENCO

Planning, teaching and managing was identified as a significant part of the SENCO mechanism, whilst this aspect is not recognised through the SEND CoP language of '*overseeing*' and '*advising*' (DfE and DoH, 2015).

SLT membership

SENCOs who related successful enactment of their roles in this context highlighted the value of being part of the school SLT, an aspect of the mechanism not currently mandated in legislation.

Supporting adults

SENCOs reported providing emotional support and sustenance to staff and parents. Whilst this need was potentially increased by the context, this nurturing approach to supporting the wellbeing of the adults who support pupils with SEN is a mechanism of the SENCO role, founded upon an implicit ethical approach of care.

This links to the outcome of the changing nature of the important partnership with parents where with many pupils with SEND not physically attending schools. Parents needed significant SENCO support, enacted through frequent and regular contact, to enable them to effectively support their children.

This research reflects the perceptions of a small number of SENCOs and therefore offers a limited snapshot of the impact of Covid-19 over the two months following the first 'lockdown'. The low response rate could be considered as reflecting the challenges and increased workload SENCOs were experiencing during this time. The findings of this research can support reflective practice in individual settings as well as contributing to the wider body of research relating to the SENCO role and the impact of Covid-19 on schools. They could also contribute to current reviews of the legislation and guidance relating to the SENCO role.

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TABLE 1

TABLE 1: SEND Code of Practice (DfE 2015, 6.90, pp.108-109)

The key responsibilities of the SENCO may include:

A. overseeing the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy
B. co-ordinating provision for children with SEN
C. liaising with the relevant Designated Teacher where a looked after pupil has SEN
D. advising on the graduated approach to providing SEN support
E. advising on the deployment of the school's delegated budget and other resources to meet pupils' needs effectively
F. liaising with parents of pupils with SEN
G. liaising with early years providers, other schools, educational psychologists, health and social care professionals, and independent or voluntary bodies
H. being a key point of contact with external agencies, especially the local authority and its support services
I. liaising with potential next providers of education to ensure a pupil and their parents are informed about options and a smooth transition is planned
J. working with the headteacher and school governors to ensure that the school meets its responsibilities under the Equality Act (2010) with regard to reasonable adjustments and access arrangements
K. ensuring that the school keeps the records of all pupils with SEN up to date

TABLE 2

Table 2: Realistic Evaluation Framework	
Context	National and local guidance, changes in regulations and restrictions because of Covid-19 'lockdown'.
Mechanism	The roles and responsibilities which a SENCO is expected to fulfil
Outcome	The changes to SENCO practice during Covid-19 'lockdown' and impact upon learners with identified Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Appendix 1: Survey Questions

1. Please identify your role
   - SENCO in a maintained primary setting
   - SENCO in an academy primary setting
   - SENCO in a maintained secondary setting
   - SENCO in an academy secondary setting
   - SENCO in an FE setting
   - Area SENCO
   - SENCO in another setting

   1a. If you selected SENCO in another setting, please specify:

2. What does leadership of SEN during lockdown mean to you?
3. How has the current situation impacted upon the time you spend on your role as SENCO as compared to normal school situation?
   - Significantly more time needed
   - Some more time needed
   - No difference
   - Less time needed
   - Significantly less time needed
   - Not sure
4. What have the expectations of your colleagues been about your role during this period?
   - Advice to support planning of interventions / online work for learners with SEND
   - Expected that I would plan interventions / online work for learners with SEND
   - Advice to support maintenance of SEND paperwork
   - Relaxation of expectations for the monitoring on learners on the SEN register
   - Other

   4a. If you selected Other, please specify:

5. Have you had contact with your SEN Governor or Trustee during this time?
   - Yes
   - No

   5a. Please explain your answer:

6. Have you accessed any of the online CPD or resources that have been available during this time?
   - Yes
   - No

   6a. If you selected Yes, please specify:

   6b. If you selected yes, what are your experiences of these online opportunities for CPD? (You may wish to comment on usefulness, quality, availability, cost, usability.....)

7. Are you part of the Senior Leadership Team of your setting?
   - Yes
   - No

   7a. How has this impacted upon your work at this time? (You may comment on both challenges and supportive aspects):

8. Do you hold a formal leadership position in your setting?
    - No
    - Yes, as a Middle Leader
    - Yes, as a Senior Leader
    - Other

    8a. If you selected Other, please specify:

    8b. If you answered "Middle Leader" or "Senior Leader", please give your leadership title(s):

9. Approximately what percentage of learners with Education Health Care Plans have been attending your setting during the lockdown period?
    - 0%, up to 15%, 16 to 30%, 31 to45%, 46 to 60%, 61 to75%, 76 to 99%, 100%

    9a. Approximately what percentage of learners with Education Health Care Plans have been attending your setting during the lockdown period?
    - 0%, up to 15%, 16 to 30%, 31 to45%, 46 to 60%, 61 to75%, 76 to 99%, 100%
10. How have you supported colleagues to plan for their pupils with SEND for distance learning?
11. Have you been able to maintain overview of how children with SEND are being supported? Please explain:
12. What has the role of TAs been during this time?

    12a. How have you deployed TAs?:

13. How are you planning for transition back into school for children and young people with SEND?

    13a. What issues do you feel will arise / need to be considered?

14. Did you have any Annual Reviews that were due to be held during this period?
    - Yes
    - No

    14a. Have you held any of these meetings and/or delayed them to a later date?:

    - Held them
    - Delayed them

    14ai. If you held them, how did you organise this? If you delayed them, how did you arrange this?

15. What are your experiences of communication from DfE?
16. What are your experiences of communication from the local authority?
17. Who has supported you to enact your SENCO role during this period? (This may be professionals in a particular role or those outside your professional relationships)
18. What has your access to your Senior Leadership Team been during this period?
19. What concerns from learners and their parents have been brought to your attention?
20. Have there been any issues with being able to offer opportunities to hear the voice of your learners with SEND during this time? If so please explain:
21. Have there been any issues or difficulties with communication with parents of your learners with SEND during this time? If so, please explain:
22. How have you supported the SEMH needs of your learners during this time?
23. As a SENCO, what are the facilitators you experience to leading SEN during this period?
    23a. What have been the barriers?
    23b. Can you tell us about one particular challenge? Did you resolve this? If yes, how?