

# Exploring the strategic nature of the SENCo's role and the management of education and health care plans since the Covid-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

This research identifies new approaches to education health and care plan (EHCP) provision since the start of the Covid-19 (C-19) pandemic (March 2020 to March 2021). This qualitative research was conducted after the C-19 pandemic and used online questionnaires to identify the perceptions of 64 SENCos recruited from mainstream primary and secondary schools across southeast London and Essex in England. Thirteen of the 64 participants then consented to be interviewed. The findings show that where SENCos had the autonomy to act strategically, they could enact change for pupils with EHCPs as well as SEND. Furthermore, aspects of practice relating to staff SEND knowledge and understanding of SEND provision were enhanced during the pandemic, as was the SENCo's ability to adapt and allocate resources effectively.

## Key points

- To enhance knowledge and understanding of pupils' specific needs, beyond just pupils with EHCPs, SEND expertise should be held at every level of school staffing structures.
- Membership of the senior leadership team is not always necessary for a SENCo to be able to exert their strategic influence.
- Collaborative working is a powerful feature in developing and maintaining knowledge and understanding of SEND across the school setting.

## INTRODUCTION

The impact of the C-19 pandemic has been significant on several levels, exacerbated by partial school closures between March 2020 and March 2021 (Castro-Kemp & Mahmud, 2021; Institute for Government, 2010; Mikiewicz & Jurczak-Morris, 2023). These closures were partial in that children of key workers and vulnerable children, including those with an EHCP, could attend school if they so chose (Long, 2020).

Contextualising the situation further highlights pre-existing inequalities within the SEND system, intensified by the impact of the C-19 pandemic (House of Commons Library, 2020). These pre-existing inequalities include

a lack of time and status, which were seen as ongoing key barriers to fulfilling the SENCo's duties (Curran & Boddison, 2021). To compound this, local interpretation of national guidance was a major factor contributing to insufficient detail about how to facilitate the role of the SENCo as set out in the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2015; Lehane, 2016; Smith & Broomhead, 2019). The pandemic's impact is evidenced in the lack of effective integration and accountability of education, health and care services as well as in widening income-based inequalities (Education Endowment Fund, 2021).

This research sought to explore the lived experiences of SENCos after the C-19 pandemic from a position of hermeneutic phenomenology (Manen, 2014;

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Shinebourne, 2011). The intention was to understand how SENCOs developed and implemented new approaches to SEND provision, specifically EHCP provision, during C-19, which are now embedded in practice.

Outcomes from the thematic analysis of the data illustrate that during the C-19 pandemic, SENCOs' strategic influence varied depending on whether they were members of the senior leadership team (SLT). Individual levels of influence were also variable due to personal characteristics, which future studies could examine in more detail. Additionally, components to build trust within a team warrant further investigation, to determine the perspectives of all staff members beyond the SENCOs. Overall, the findings show there was greater consistency for many SENCOs in the implementation of SEND provision, encompassing EHCPs, during the C-19 pandemic, partly because the SENCO could develop deeper knowledge and understanding of individual pupils' needs.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Exploring the role of the SENCO

This section outlines how the SENCO role is understood and defined in policies and research. The SENCO's role is defined in the SEND Code of Practice as someone who 'has day-to-day responsibility for the operation of SEN policy and co-ordination of specific provision made to support individual pupils with SEN, including those who have education health and care (EHC) plans' (Department for Education, 2015, p. 108). Considering the SENCO's status, the SEND Code of Practice offers that they 'will be most effective in that role if they are part of the school leadership team' (Department for Education, 2015, p. 108). Indeed, a key feature of the SENCO's role is to champion inclusion for pupils with SEND, regardless of whether they are part of the leadership team (Curran, 2019). SENCOs who are members of the SLT have been more successful in enacting their roles, both before and during C-19 (Middleton & Kay, 2021). The importance of the SENCO in co-ordinating SEND provision is widely acknowledged, with some research suggesting that it should be reflected in securing a mandatory leadership provision (Clarke & Done, 2021; Tissot, 2013).

However, while the value of the SENCO having membership of the leadership team is evidenced in both research and policy, leadership status is situational; the individual does not always choose the leadership role, rather the situation dictates who is chosen or placed into it (Small, 2019). When exploring SENCO identity and its relationship to SLT membership, some SENCOs felt that membership was not necessary (Lin et al., 2021; Maher & Vickerman, 2018). These ideas are further extended by drawing awareness to tensions emerging from the ways in which the SENCO role is interpreted by the SENCO

themselves, which may be different to a headteacher's interpretation (Dobson, 2019). For example, SENCOs may have contrasting responsibilities and accountabilities across different schools.

Another issue impacting the ability of the SENCO to fulfil their role effectively is that of protected time, which is not consistently established (Curran et al., 2018; Layton, 2005). This is partly due to SENCOs performing various roles, including (potentially) class teacher, assistant or deputy head, designated safeguarding lead and subject lead (Ofsted, 2021). Encouragingly, the National SENCO Workforce survey recommends that SENCOs have protected time as well as increased administrative support (Curran et al., 2020). This could empower SENCOs to foster and maintain a principle of relational trust by allotting SENCOs more time to actively build relationships with stakeholders (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). However, as Robertson (2023) points out, the SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan (Department for Education, 2023) does not address critical issues for schools, such as securing the SENCO leadership role, ring-fencing time for SENCOs to perform essential duties and ensuring adequate administrative support. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that there are diverse perspectives on how to effectively fulfil the SENCO role, keeping in mind that 'SENCOs may find their identity swamped by the understandable agendas of those around them' (Kay et al., 2022, p. 348).

### Education, health and care plans; before, during and after the C-19 pandemic

An integral part of a SENCO's role is to support the development, implementation and monitoring of EHCPs (Arnold & Hoskin, 2021). The EHCP is a statutory document, developed to reflect provision within the individual's mainstream or specialist setting (Department for Education, 2015). Prior to the C-19 pandemic, there were challenges associated with implementing the provision indicated on the EHCP, such as accessing multi-agency professionals; difficulties with the effective time-management of provision; and the quality of written evidence (Richards, 2022). Difficulties were also observed in relationships with health and care professionals where detachment from and misunderstandings of the EHCP process occurred (Boesley & Crane, 2018). Similarly, children and young people's involvement in the EHCP processes appeared limited, with inconsistency in the quality of EHCPs and identified outcomes (Cochrane & Soni, 2020).

When exploring the educational experiences of pupils with EHCPs before C-19, the necessity for teachers to have significantly increased knowledge and understanding of how to effectively meet the needs of pupils with SEND was emphasised (Webster & Blatchford, 2019). This intersects with how the SENCO's strategic guidance

could be exercised, ideally with support from the SLT, to reinforce the SEND Code of Practice's statement that all teachers are teachers of pupils with SEND (Department for Education, 2015). A SENCo's knowledge is considered central to the success of the EHCP process, and is demonstrated through their parental support, close work with external agencies and written EHCPs (Cochrane & Soni, 2020).

Previous research findings outlined negative features of EHCPs, which included lack of clarity around documentation or provision and need. In addition, the extent of pupil and parental involvement in the planning process needed clarity (Castro & Palikara, 2016; Castro-Kemp et al., 2019; Palikara et al., 2018). Furthermore, between 2016 and 2020 a lack of co-production and joint commissioning as well as poor-quality EHCPs, in addition to issues with identifying and assessing needs (Ofsted, 2021). Children and young people should be at the forefront of the provision that concerns them (Hodkinson, 2020).

Some educational professionals argue that pupils with EHCPs who attended school during the C-19 lockdown thrived perhaps because reduced class sizes led to more individualised support and intervention (Ashworth et al., 2024). Similarly, some pupils with SEND who learnt online at home flourished as they were able to take breaks when required and experienced less pressure to keep pace with their classmates (McGuire, 2020). However, the move from face-to-face to online needs assessments resulted in delays, partly because professionals could not physically meet the pupil being assessed (Council for Disabled Children, 2021).

A positive, enduring feature of SEND provision that developed during the C-19 pandemic is the use of virtual space for EHCP review meetings, making co-ordination and the attendance of wider multi-agencies, parents and/or carers easier to facilitate (Boddison & Curran, 2022). Yet, there are significant challenges cited within the Special Educational Needs and Alternative Provision green paper, which states that the existing SEND and alternative provision system is 'financially unsustainable' (Department for Education, 2023; Long & Roberts, 2024, p. 20). This is a concerning prospect given that 10% of children and young people are anticipated to have EHCPs in 2042 compared to 2.5% EHCPs in 2017 (Marsh, 2023).

## METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative research methodology (Smith et al., 2009). Specifically, it assumes a position of hermeneutic phenomenology by interpreting the participants' lived experiences (Manen, 2014; Shinebourne, 2011). It sought to identify what Heidegger referred to as *das-sein* (Heidegger, 1927 in Haugeland, 2013) – an opening or space by or in which humans experience their world,

recognising that meaning is found within experiences (Palmer, 1969). This research further acknowledges the existence of multiple and alternative views, as is characteristic of the hermeneutic tradition (Haugeland, 2013), illustrated here where 'the phenomenological approach is primarily descriptive, seeking to illuminate issues in a radical, unprejudiced manner' (Moran, 2002, p. 1). Common experiences that 'require phenomenological attentiveness precisely because they are so common and unremarkable' (Manen, 2015, p. 49) were sought, such as the everyday expectation that SENCOs, according to the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2015), advise on and co-ordinate school special educational needs policy as well as provision across their school for pupils with SEND. Regarding uncommon experiences, Manen (2015, p. 61) asked how it is that we can understand something that we have not personally experienced. Therefore, to describe what we, as researchers, have not experienced, we explored the participants' significant experiences during their time as SENCOs during the C-19 pandemic.

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling (Punch, 2009) from the southeast of England. They had to either be currently undertaking or have already achieved the National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination (NASENCo) as well as working currently in a primary or secondary educational setting. Invitations to take part in the research were emailed to NASENCo alumni from the University of East London who had undertaken the course between September 2015 to August 2022.

In total, 64 online questionnaires, using Microsoft Forms, were completed. On completion of the questionnaire, participants were asked for their permission to be contacted for a semi-structured interview, which would explore themes arising from the initial questionnaires. Consent was given by 13 participants to be interviewed on a one-to-one basis, online, using Microsoft Teams. The initial online questionnaire explored contextual information, such as whether participants were members of the SLT and whether they had teaching responsibilities. There were also open-ended questions asking participants about their experiences of managing provision for pupils with EHCPs during and after the C-19 pandemic. Subsequent interviews explored more deeply the themes arising from our initial questionnaires, such as the extent of levels of strategic influence for the SENCo and how SEND knowledge and understanding are distributed among practitioners. The overarching focus was to ascertain how changes to practice during the C-19 pandemic have been embedded.

Our qualitative data was thematically analysed to distinguish themes therein (Flick, 2018). Inductive coding was used to identify an index of codes. We sought themes emerging from the data as opposed to deductive coding, which derives codes from theory (Naeem et al., 2023).

To observe the phenomenological approach during data analysis, open-ended responses from the

questionnaires and interview transcripts were de-identified. They were then read twice by all researchers to enhance reflexivity, with notes added to indicate arising themes (Flick, 2018). We developed categories for coding from this initial phase and maintained openness to themes that may arise from the data that had not been considered previously (Dibley et al., 2020).

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the researchers' university ethics committee at the outset of the study, with ethical principles upheld following ethical guidelines for educational research articulated by the British Educational Research Association (2024). Data collection and explanations about the purpose of the research were provided to participants using Microsoft Forms, an online data-gathering tool, and participants were informed that their engagement was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any stage (Thomas, 2013). Anonymity of their engagement with the questionnaires was maintained using Microsoft Forms, which does not require participant identification for the respondent to answer questions. Only if participants indicated that they wished to take part in the follow-up interviews were their contact details requested (to make interview arrangements). At the interview stage, researchers explained that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained during the presentation of the results and when sharing transcription excerpts, central issues in qualitative data analysis (Flick, 2018; Swain, 2017).

## Findings

This research focused on learning about what new approaches have developed regarding EHCP provision since the C-19 pandemic. The findings presented here highlight the most prominent themes that emerged from the data: how SENCOs supported the development of staff knowledge and understanding of SEND provision, changes to meeting individual needs and the strategic nature of the SENCO role.

### The SENCO's role in developing staff knowledge and understanding of SEND

Participants shared their experiences about team-oriented practice with evidence that focus had to be given to the ways in which SENCOs could support teachers. For example, they could translate advice in SEND-related documentation (such as EHCPs), consider how unique learning challenges could be improved and highlight the need for effective dialogue with colleagues:

'All staff needed to trust that you were there for them and would support them in finding solutions to their concerns. And if you could do this in a creative and non-threatening way, then you were able to create an environment in which questions and problems could be shared.'

Participant 7, an inclusion manager at a mainstream primary school, middle leader (not on SLT).

The team-oriented, strategic nature of the SENCO role was discussed by one interviewee, a mainstream SENCO in a secondary school (not on the SLT), who shared that they had arranged and delivered many continuing professional development (CPD) sessions before and after the C-19 pandemic, arriving at a point that the training was not seen to be having a positive impact on practice. In response to this, they developed a new initiative called 'The Little SENCO'. This creative strategy aimed to remind teachers to consistently draw on the training that they had already received – the Little SENCO within themselves – and to ignite teachers' embedded knowledge so they would more confidently put it into practice.

In one SENCO's primary school, there was a new model of delegated duties post-pandemic where year group leaders undertook increased administrative duties related to SEND provision:

'They've [year group leaders] got a far deeper handle on the provision for their year groups than they did before Covid ... we're in a stronger position now because it doesn't all just live in my head.'

Participant 10, who worked in a mainstream primary school (not on SLT).

Only one interviewee said that there has been no change in practice since the C-19 pandemic, as their processes and systems were already effective:

'Our EHCP provision was good pre-pandemic, and this has continued throughout the pandemic. We work to ensure that our EHCP provision is always as effective as possible and continuously review and improve our offer; however, none of these are as a direct result of the pandemic.'

Participant 4, SENCO in a mainstream primary school (on SLT).

Some interviewees described the ways in which knowledge and understanding of SEND improved during the pandemic. This knowledge needed to be distributed to

staff in a different format while they were in various locations, such as their homes or different classrooms with different children. Since the pandemic, there has been increased use of online staff meetings to reliably distribute reminders about SEND provision. In one mainstream secondary school, weekly briefings include a specific SEND focus where the assistant headteacher shares brief overviews of strategies for specific needs and asks staff to give two strategies to support a particular need.

A further example of making SEND knowledge accessible was shared in an interview by a SENCo in a primary school who, after the pandemic, developed a new SEND-themed wall display to show all staff how high-quality teaching (HQT) can link to areas of need. The display included suggested specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) goals and relevant SEND documents to support engagement with the graduated approach. These physical resources were later made into an easily accessible online resource, regularly referred to in weekly staff meetings to promote discussion around effectively meeting the needs of pupils with SEND.

Another SENCo in a mainstream primary school, on the SLT, described how using online courses to train teaching assistants during the C-19 pandemic has been a 'game changer' post-C-19 pandemic, making teaching assistants (TAs) feel more valued and skilled.

### Changes to meeting individual needs since the Covid-19 pandemic

When asked in the questionnaire about what new approaches had taken place regarding EHCP provision since the pandemic, some participants reflected an increased knowledge of the ways in which to meet individual needs; for example, tailored interventions for high needs were arranged, which had not been in place beforehand. Another participant stated that provision-mapping software was purchased to support strategic oversight of pupils with SEND. For pupils with profound and complex needs, grouping learning for pre-formal and semi-formal children worked well to alleviate staffing issues. Post-pandemic, these pupils now initiated more activities themselves and were able to move around the school more independently. Similarly, one participant stated:

'There has been more opportunity to encourage independence and different ways of supporting children as these had to be adapted during the pandemic. Staff have become used to different ways of working with pupils rather than 1:1 provision.'

Participant 43, a SENCo in a mainstream primary school (on SLT).

Comparably, a SENCo in a mainstream secondary school experienced positive outcomes by working closely with teaching staff to develop the skill of translating provision set out in an EHCP. Deciding how to implement these adaptations into the day-to-day schedule meant that the pupils with EHCPs were less detached from their peers:

'I think if anything has changed, we have become more cognisant of their needs'

Participant 13, a deputy head in a mainstream secondary school (on SLT).

Similarly, in one questionnaire response to how practice has improved since the C-19 pandemic, an inclusion manager who is on the SLT in a mainstream primary school stated that they now have much more flexibility because the pandemic conferred a sense of *we know our children best*, and they felt more confident to support pupils with SEND as they and the parents saw fit.

From a wider school perspective, post-C-19 pandemic changes to practice in Key Stage 2, include:

'Not setting for Maths and English – the same class teacher with children all day means they know more about where they are with their learning and there is less lost learning time.'

Participant 57, a SENCo in a mainstream primary school (not on SLT).

### The extent of the SENCo's strategic influence

When focusing on leadership experiences during and after the C-19 pandemic, there was minimal specific mention of leading on provision for pupils with EHCPs. The prominent findings from the interviews related to the participants' broader experiences of leadership during and after the C-19 pandemic and enacting changes to wider school provision, rather than just for pupils with EHCPs.

Analysis of SLT membership revealed that of the 64 questionnaire respondents, 66% were members of the SLT, while 53% of the 13 interviewees were on their school's SLT. Considering the impact of SLT membership on how strategic the SENCo can be, one interviewee who actively avoided becoming a member of the SLT stated:

'You can get there from the middle even better than from the top sometimes' [and] it's good in terms of the psychology of your position, how you're perceived by the rest of the staff, that you're not automatically seen as part of that group at the top.'

Participant 6, an inclusion manager in a four-form entry mainstream primary school (not on SLT).

The interviews revealed a sense that shared ownership of SEND knowledge across middle leaders who were not part of the SLT was one effective method to be more strategic. One interviewee perceived this stance as much less threatening. One SENCo who has been line-managed by the headteacher since C-19 and who is not a member of the SLT shared they can:

‘... actually get things done very quickly because obviously they [the headteacher] can say yes or no straight away and cut to the chase.’

Participant 3, a SENCo in a mainstream secondary school (not on SLT).

The interviews revealed that SENCos identified SLT status with power. One participant shared:

‘I don't feel like I have that power; I'm associate assistant principal, but I'm, it's more middle leadership rather than senior leadership.’

Participant 5, an associate assistant principal in a mainstream secondary school; (middle leader not on SLT)

Similarly, an inclusion manager in a mainstream primary school who is not on the SLT stated in her interview that she would much rather be influential than powerful, citing that she felt she played a stronger role in decision-making and had a greater impact across the school as a middle leader.

Stronger influence is seen here, from the point of view of a member of the SLT:

‘The SENCos tried and my deputy SENCo has tried. When I tried and I said to the science team, so actually children are failing in your subject. What's going on? You haven't responded. I get a response.’

Participant 2, an assistant headteacher in a mainstream secondary school (on SLT).

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research aimed to identify new approaches to EHCP provision since the start of the C-19 pandemic. From the three key themes explored in our findings, positive influence in enhancing SEND provision

beyond EHCP provision is evident, which could reflect a broader view of how pupils with EHCPs are included in the whole-school approach to provision for pupils with SEND.

First, the role of the SENCo in developing knowledge and understanding of SEND and incorporating EHCP provision was associated with trust by one SENCo. The SENCo highlighted that fostering trust among staff created an atmosphere of openness, seen as the foundation for building relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). This environment encouraged staff to approach the SENCo with questions, which may have enabled proactive troubleshooting, preventing issues related to EHCPs as well as general SEND provision, from escalating. However, the ability to build trust in staff could be impacted by several factors, such as SENCos not having adequate protected time (Curran et al., 2018; Layton, 2005) being surrounded by various agendas (Kay et al., 2022) or the number of positions held in addition to their main role as SENCo (Ofsted, 2021).

Further, collaborative practice was a key theme, contributing to raised levels of knowledge and understanding of SEND, with SENCos sharing the wider impact of their role beyond the focus on just EHCPs. This establishes a connection between the strategic aspect of their role having a whole-school influence for all pupils whereby SENCos are enhancing knowledge and understanding of SEND provision for all teachers (Clarke & Done, 2021; Department for Education, 2015; Webster & Blatchford, 2019). However, while this research presents a SENCo perspective of actions undertaken, a measure of the influence of these changes is required to ascertain a longer-term impact.

Ensuring SEND expertise is held at every level is a tenet set out in the SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan (Department for Education, 2023). With the continued inequality in outcomes for pupils with SEND across the UK as well as increasing numbers of EHCPs being granted, (Marsh, 2023; Ofsted, 2021), this escalating need should unite with increased focus on improvements in teachers' adaptability in providing reasonable adjustments for a range of needs in their classrooms, not just pupils with EHCPs. This has been highlighted by Richards (2022) to be a desirable factor in whole-school understanding of SEND provision and knowledge, evidenced by one participant's creative idea of ‘The Little SENCo’, designed to increase staff confidence and competence about SEND for all pupils.

Considering how EHCP provision is managed, analysis from the questionnaires and interviews revealed that the SENCo role is one of strategic intent. Out of the SENCos, four of the six interviewees who were not on the SLT spoke about how influential they felt in their position. Two explicitly stated that the power related to an SLT role does not necessarily equate to influence. These findings contrast to the SEND Code of

Practice's statement that the SENCo will 'be most effective in that role if they are part of the school leadership team' (Department for Education, 2015, p. 108). Yet, it aligns with research indicating that SENCos can exert strategic influence regardless of whether they are members of the SLT (Curran, 2019; Lin et al., 2021; Maher & Vickerman, 2018). While it was not an explicit finding in our research that some SENCos felt more successful due to being on the leadership team, the significance of SENCos having influence when co-ordinating SEND provision was clear (Clarke & Done, 2021; Tissot, 2013). What is not clear is whether the C-19 pandemic contributed to this sense of influence and the impact this has had on specific approaches to EHCP management during the C-19 pandemic. This could be due to participant responses reflecting a more innate outlook of EHCPs being incorporated into the SEND provision.

## CONCLUSION

Several SENCos in this research successfully engaged with their experiences during the C-19 pandemic to enhance knowledge and understanding in specific areas of SEND provision for staff and be more conscious of pupils' specific needs since the pandemic, beyond just pupils with EHCPs. Transferring these experiences beyond this sample of participants could support all school staff to be more cognisant of pupils' needs, establishing greater consistency in the quality of EHCPs and identified outcomes.

How schools define the position of their SENCo is crucial to the successful enactment of the role, leading to the best possible outcomes for pupils both with and without EHCPs. Related to the theme of SLT membership is the concept of levels of influence, which vary between individuals due to in-person characteristics, something which could be explored more closely in future research. The ways in which strategic influence connects to building trust across a team is also suitable for further exploration.

Since all practitioners in schools will work with pupils who have EHCPs as well as pupils with SEND, it is essential that exemplary practice as described in this research is consistently shared and integrated across the landscape of SEND provision. Attention needs to be given to how this aligns with the national professional qualification (NPQ), the new mandatory qualification for SENCos from September 2024.

## Limitations

Considering this study's limitations, due to the participants' settings in mainstream primary and secondary schools in southeast England, the findings' generalisability is minimal. Additionally, the number of

participants is small in comparison to the population of SENCos in English schools.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study was approved by the University of East London's ethics committee and pursued in accordance with BERA ethical guidelines.

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