Exploring the strategic nature of the SENCo and the management of Education and Health Care Plans since the Covid-19 pandemic

Abstract

The principal aim of this research was to identify 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 (Institute for Government, 2021). The qualitative research took place after the C-19 pandemic, with online questionnaires used to identify perceptions of 64 Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCos). Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with 13 of the 64 participants, who gave consent to be interviewed. Participants were from mainstream primary and secondary schools across Southeast London and Essex in England.

Findings showed that where SENCos had the autonomy to be strategic in nature, they could enact change to provision for pupils with EHCPs as well as Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).   Furthermore, aspects of practice relating to staff SEND knowledge and understanding of SEND provision were enhanced during the C-19 pandemic, together with the SENCo's improved ability to adapt and allocate resources effectively.

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 and Mahmud, 2021; Mikiewicz and Jurczak-Morris, 2023). These closures were partial in that children of key workers and vulnerable children, including those with an EHCP, were permitted to attend school if they chose to (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 time and lack of status, seen as an ongoing key barrier to fulfilling the duties of a SENCo (Curran and 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 and Broomhead, 2019). Some aspects of impact from the C-19 pandemic are evidenced in the lack of effective integration and accountability of education, health and care services as well as income-based inequities having widened (Education Endowment Fund, 2021).

The research sought to portray the lived experiences of SENCos after the C-19 pandemic from a position of hermeneutic phenomenology (Manen, 2014; Shinebourne, 2011). Our 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 thematic analysis of the data illustrated that during the C-19 pandemic, a SENCos' strategic influence varied whether they were members of the senior leadership team or not (SLT). Individual levels of influence were also variable due to personal

characteristics, which could be examined in more detail in future studies. Additionally, components to building trust within a team warrants further investigation, to determine perspectives of all staff members beyond just the SENCo's. Overall, findings showed there was greater consistency for many SENCos in the implementation of SEND provision, encompassing EHCPs, during the C-19 pandemic, partly due to the SENCo being able to develop deeper knowledge and understanding of individual pupil needs.

Literature Review

Exploring the role of the SENCo

This section will outline how the SENCo role is understood and defined within policy and research. The duties relating to a SENCo are outlined in the SEND Code of Practice as someone who 'has day-to-day responsibility for the operation of SEN policy and coordination 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 status of the SENCo, 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 role of the SENCo is to champion inclusion for pupils with SEND, whether they are part of the leadership team (Curran, 2019). Similarly, SENCos who are members of the SLT have been more successful in enacting their roles, both before and during C-19 (Middleton and Kay, 2021). The importance of the SENCo role in coordinating SEND provision is widely acknowledged, with some research suggesting that it should be reflected in securing a mandatory leadership provision (Tissot, 2013; Clarke and Done, 2021).

However, while the value of the SENCo having membership of the leadership team is evidenced in both research and policy, leadership status can be realised as situational in that it is not always the individual choosing the leadership role but the situation dictating 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 to their influence as a SENCo, (Lin *et al*., 2021; Maher and 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 (Dobson, 2019). For example, SENCos may have contrasting responsibilities and accountability standards 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 dealing with a variety of roles including the demands of being not only a class teacher but also assistant or deputy head, designated safeguarding lead, subject lead and other roles in their settings (Ofsted, 2021). Encouragingly, recommendations put forward by the findings from the National SENCo Workforce survey stated that SENCos should 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, picturing SENCos having more time to focus on building positive foundations of trust with

stakeholders more actively (Bryk and 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 responsibility which forms a large part of a SENCo's role is to support development, implementation, and monitoring of EHCPs (Arnold and 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 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 and 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 and 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 is emphasised (Webster and Blatchford, 2019). This intersects with how the SENCo's strategic guidance can 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 seen as central to the EHCP process being successful, with endeavours such as supporting parents, working closely with external agencies, and writing EHCPs being a feature of their work (Cochrane and Soni, 2020).

Comparable findings have outlined negative aspects of EHCPs which include lack of clarity around documentation of provision and need as well as questions about the extent of pupil and parental involvement in the planning process (Castro and Palikara, 2016; Palikara et al., 2018; Castro-Kemp et al., 2019). 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 need (Ofsted, 2021). It is the children and young people who should be at the forefront of the very provision that is about them (Hodkinson, 2020).

During the C-19 pandemic, views of some educational professionals showed that pupils with EHCPs who attended school during lockdown were seen to thrive, one reason being that reduced class sizes made it more possible for them to receive individualised support and intervention (Ashworth et al., 2024). Similarly, some pupils with SEND who remained at

home to engage with online learning were seen to flourish as they were able to take breaks when required and experience less pressure to keep pace with their classmates (McGuire, 2020). However, the move from face-to-face to online needs assessments brought delays in them being undertaken, in part due to professionals not being able to physically meet the pupil to assess need (Council for Disabled Children, 2021).

Nevertheless, a positive feature after the C-19 pandemic has been that some SENCos state they will continue to use the virtual space for EHCP review meetings, making coordination and attendance of wider multi-agencies, parents and or carers easier to facilitate (Boddison and Curran, 2022). Yet there are significant challenges cited within the Special Educational Needs and Alternative Provision green paper which state that the existing SEND and alternative provision system is 'financially unsustainable' (Long and Robert, 2024, p.20; Department for Education, 2022). This is a concerning prospect when looking at the prediction that by 2042, there will be an increase from 2.5% EHCPS in 2017, to 10% in 2042 (Marsh, 2023).

Methodology

The study used qualitative research methodology (Smith *et al*., 2009). More specifically, it reflected a position of hermeneutic phenomenology by aiming to interpret the structures of lived experiences of those participating (Manen, 2014; Shinebourne, 2011).   It sought to identify what Heidegger referred to as Dasein; (Heidegger, 1927 in Haugland, 2013) an opening or space by or in which humans experience their world; recognising that meaning is found within the experience (Palmer, 1969). This research further acknowledges the existence of multiple and alternative views as is characteristic of the hermeneutic tradition (Haugland, 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 which 'require phenomenological attentiveness precisely because they are so common and unremarkable' (Manen, 2015, p.49) were sought. For example, the everyday expectation that a SENCo would, according to the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2015), advise on and co-ordinate school SEN policy as well as provision across the school for pupils with SEND. In relation to uncommon experiences, Manen (2015, p.61) asked how it is that we can understand something we ourselves have not experienced. Therefore, to describe what we, as researchers, have not experienced, we explored participant's significant experiences of their time as SENCO's, reflecting *their world*; in this context, that of the educational setting within which they were working during the C-19 pandemic.

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling (Punch, 2009) from the southeastern region 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 on-line questionnaire explored contextual information such as whether participants were members of the senior leadership team (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 post 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 is distributed amongst practitioners. The overarching focus was to ascertain the ways in which changes to practice during the C-19 pandemic had been embedded.

The method chosen to analyse our qualitative data was thematic analysis, used to distinguish themes arising from the data (Flick, 2018). Inductive coding was used to identify an index of codes, whereby we sought themes emerging from the data as opposed to deductive coding which derives codes from theory (Naeem, 2023).

Finally, to observe the phenomenological approach during data analysis, open ended responses from the questionnaires as well as interview transcripts were de-identified. They were then read twice through 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 as to themes that may arise from the data which had not been considered previously (Dibley et al, 2020).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the researcher's University Ethics Committee at the outset of the research, 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 not only that their engagement was voluntary but that they had the right to withdraw at any stage of the process (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 would their contact details be required to make interview arrangements. At the stage of interview, researchers explained that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained during presentation of results and shared excerpts of transcription, central issues in qualitative data analysis (Flick, 2018; Swain, 2017).

Findings

The focus of this research was to learn more about what new approaches had taken place regarding EHCP provision since the C-19 pandemic. Findings presented here focus on the most prominent themes which emerged from the data; how SENCos supported the

development of staff knowledge and understanding of SEND provision; changes to meeting individual need since the Covid-19 pandemic; 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 to, for example: translate advice in SEND related documentation such as EHCPs; consider how unique learning challenges could be improved; and highlighting the need for effective dialogue with colleagues as seen here:

'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: Inclusion Manager in primary mainstream school; middle leader not on SLT).

The team-oriented, strategic nature of the SENCo role was also seen with one interviewee, a mainstream SENCo in a secondary school (not on the SLT) sharing 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 was to remind teachers to consistently draw on the training that they had already received; their Little SENCo within themselves and a method to ignite teachers' embedded knowledge, more confidently putting 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'* [and they go on to state that] *'we're in a stronger position now because it doesn't all just live in my head.'*
(participant 10: in primary mainstream school; not on SLT).

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

'O*ur 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 primary mainstream school, on SLT).

Furthermore, some interviewees described the ways in which knowledge and understanding around SEND improved across settings as during the pandemic it needed to be distributed

to staff in a different format while they were all in various locations i.e., at home or in 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 secondary mainstream school, weekly briefings now held a specific SEND focus where the assistant head teacher would share brief overviews of strategies for specific need and ask 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 goals that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound (SMART) 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 had been a *'game changer'* post-C-19 pandemic, making teaching assistants (TAs) feel more valued and more highly skilled.

Changes to meeting individual need 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 and another participant stated provision mapping software was purchased to support strategic oversight of SEND pupils. For pupils with profound and complex needs, grouping learning for pre-formal and semi-formal children had 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.'
(questionnaire participant 43: SENCo primary mainstream school; on SLT).

Comparably, a SENCo in a secondary mainstream school experienced positive outcomes by working closely with teaching staff to develop the skill of translating provision set out in an EHCP. By then working on how these adaptations can become part of the day-to-day schedule meant that there was less detachment for the pupils with EHCPs from their peers:

'I think if anything has changed, we have become more cognisant of their needs…'
(questionnaire participant 13: deputy head in secondary mainstream 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 they now have much more flexibility as the pandemic has given them a sense of *'we know our children best'* and they felt more confident to support pupils with SEND how they and parents felt was most appropriate.

From a wider school perspective, impact was seen post C-19 pandemic when referring to practice in key stage 2, with changes such as:

'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.'
(questionnaire participant 57: SENCo in primary mainstream school; not on SLT).

The extent of the SENCo's strategic influence

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

Analysis of membership to SLT showed that of 64 participants who responded to the questionnaire, 66% were members of the SLT, with 53% on the SLT out of the 13 interviewees. Firstly, considering the impact of SLT membership on how strategic the SENCo could be, one interview participant 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 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: inclusion manager in 4 form entry mainstream primary school; not on SLT)

The interviews also 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, seen by one participant as much less threatening. One SENCo who has been line managed by the head teacher since C-19, and is not a member of the SLT shared they can:

*'… actually, get things done very quickly because obviously they [*head teacher*] can say yes or no straight away and cut to the chase.'*
*(*participant 3: SENCo in secondary mainstream school; not on SLT)

Further evidence from interviews with SENCos identified 'power' in relation to SLT status with one participant sharing:

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

(participant 5: associate assistant principle secondary mainstream school; middle leader not on SLT)

Similarly, in their interview, an inclusion manager in a primary mainstream school who is not on the SLT stated that she would much rather be influential than powerful, citing she felt she played a stronger role in decision making and 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: assistant head teacher in secondary mainstream school; on SLT)

Discussion and implications

The aim of this research was 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.

Firstly, the role of the SENCo in developing knowledge and understanding of SEND, 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 and Schneider, 2002). This environment encouraged staff to approach the SENCo with questions, which may have enabled proactive troubleshooting, preventing issues from escalating, related to EHCPs as well as general SEND provision. 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 (Department for Education, 2015; Clarke and Done, 2021; Webster and 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 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) and with the continued

variation in outcomes for pupils with SEND across the UK, as well as increasing numbers of EHCPs being granted, (Ofsted, 2021; Marsh, 2023), 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 in relation to SEND, not just for pupils with EHCPs, but all pupils.

Considering the ways in which EHCP provision is managed, analysis from the questionnaires and interviews revealed that the SENCo role is one of strategic intent. Out of the SENCos, 4 of the 6 interviewees who were not on the SLT spoke about how influential they felt in their position, with two explicitly stating that the power status 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 and 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 the influence when coordinating SEND provision was clear (Tissot, 2013; Clarke and Done, 2021). What is not clear, is whether the C-19 pandemic contributed to this sense of influence and the impact this 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 SEND provision.

Conclusion

It has been shown that several SENCos in this research have successfully engaged with some of their experiences during the C-19 pandemic, enhancing knowledge and understanding in specific areas of SEND provision for staff and being more conscious of specific needs of pupils since the C-19 pandemic, beyond just pupils with EHCPs. Transferring these experiences beyond this sample of participants could support all school staff to be more *cognisant* of pupil needs, establishing greater consistency in the quality of EHCPs and identified outcomes.

The way in which schools define the position of their SENCo is crucial to successful enactment of the role, leading to the best possible outcomes for pupils both with EHCPs as well as those without an EHCP. Related to the theme of membership of the SLT is levels of influence, seen to 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 levels of trust across a team is also suitable for further exploration; to ascertain how effective this is from the viewpoint of wider staff across educational settings, not just the SENCo.

Since every practitioner 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 into practice across the landscape of SEND provision. Attention needs to be given as to how this aligns with the national professional qualification (NPQ), the new mandatory qualification for SENCos from September 2024.

Limitations

Considering limitations, due to the specific location of participant's settings in primary and secondary mainstream schools, located in South-East England, the generalisability of findings is minimal. However, the number of participants is small in comparison to the population of SENCos in English schools.

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