Balancing pressures for SENCos as managers, leaders and advocates in the emerging context of the Covid-19 pandemic

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This article considers the role of the SENCo during Covid-19 pandemic conditions of school lockdown with partial reopening for children classified as ‘vulnerable’. It is argued that the existing pressures and tensions already experienced by SENCos – for example, related to time, workload, status, and their prescribed managerial and strategic role – have been highlighted by pandemic conditions. Pressures resulting specifically from the pandemic are reflected by considering how SENCos will adjust to enact their role during this time. It is concluded that an advocacy role for pupils with special educational needs and disability, who are at risk of becoming increasingly marginalised within school and wider communities during this pandemic, should now be considered a central element of the SENCo’s remit.

Key words: SENCos, inclusion-related leadership, crisis planning, advocacy

Introduction
This article explores the literature on the SENCo role during the recent Covid-19 pandemic and preceding literature that considers the pressures faced by many SENCos. The assumption that SENCos are in senior roles or members of a senior leadership team, such that they can exercise strategic leadership, contradicts the experience of a significant proportion of SENCos in schools in England. Hallett and Hallett (2020) have also questioned the
future relevance of this role, since the latest Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice issued by the Department for Education and the Department of Health (DfE & DoH, 2015) shifts responsibility away from SENCo, requiring all class teachers to take responsibility for children in their class. Research funded by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) is underway in a collaboration between the Universities of Plymouth and Exeter. The objective is to determine the level of involvement of SENCo in school planning once school closures were required by Government, in organising offsite and onsite provision for ‘vulnerable’ students, and in planning for the return of those students in the event of full reopening of schools in autumn 2020. A preliminary literature review is published here, as it highlights many existing concerns related to the SENCo role. In what follows, details on prevailing and future pandemic conditions are provided in order to convey the context that SENCo have been, and will be, navigating. It is then suggested that pandemic conditions have highlighted the paramount importance of the advocacy and leadership aspects of the SENCo role.

Context
School closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic were introduced by the UK Government on 20 March 2020 as part of a national lockdown (DfE & Williamson, 2020b). Worldwide estimates suggest that school closures impacted approximately 80% of children and young people across 188 countries where such closures were intended to limit the spread of Covid-19 (Lee, 2020; Petretto et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2020). The UK Department for Education did, however, ensure that the children of key workers and ‘vulnerable’ pupils, including pupils with SEND who had Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), were able to attend school (Ashbury et al., 2020; DfE, 2020a). In these circumstances and during full school opening, parents were encouraged to send their child to school and were assured that provision for those with EHCPs would continue through adaptations to Section 42 of the Children and Families Act 2014. Accordingly, ‘reasonable adjustments’ became ‘reasonable endeavours’ in response to the pandemic until 25 September 2020 (Daniels et al., 2020; DfE, 2020b). However, initial discrepancies between local authorities’ interpretations of ‘endeavours’ have been identified, suggesting that professionals who support pupils with SEND and their families may enact vastly different levels of provision during the pandemic (De Winter, 2020). A recent House of Commons Education Committee (2020a, Q691) report highlights geographic inconsistencies and their amplification due to the pandemic:
‘The pre-existing inequalities in the system have been exacerbated because so little has been done in some places for children who are already experiencing difficulties in their education’.

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

During the initial weeks of lockdown, Ashbury et al. (2020) noted that 73% of families in their small sample had eligible places at school, yet only 8% had chosen to send their child to school. This proportion accords with the first national data collected by the Department of Education on 17 April 2020 which estimated that 5% of pupils classified as a ‘child in need’ or with an EHCP had attended school (DfE, 2020c). This figure has been gradually increasing throughout the pandemic. Ashbury et al. (2020) indicate that the health risks involved may have been a factor in parents choosing to educate their child at home, while schools were also expected to risk-assess pupils with SEND in relation to Covid-19 (DfE, 2020b). Research by the Disabled Children’s Partnership (2020) found that parents felt forgotten by professionals and that parents were having to balance increased educational and
caring demands for their disabled child. It has also been found that a lack of support from schools and other services has had an impact on the mental health of families and children with SEND (House of Commons Education Committee, 2020a, Q690).

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

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

Despite this development in professional understanding of the role, the role is multifaceted; Kearns (2005) found that SENCos adopt multiple, sometimes concurrent, approaches or roles, including that of arbiter, rescuer, auditor, collaborator and expert. This supports the view that the SENCo role is particularly complex, creating specific difficulties for those in the role (Esposito & Carroll, 2019; Smith & Broomhead, 2019). Pragmatic issues, including a lack of appropriate time to undertake the tasks demanded by the role, are evident in the relevant literature, with studies highlighting how SENCos feel this restricts them from carrying out their role effectively (Done et al., 2016; Boesley & Crane, 2018; Curran et al., 2018). These time pressures often result from the SENCo role being held by someone who also has class teaching responsibilities (Dobson, 2019; Smith & Broomhead, 2019). Furthermore, subsequent SEND Codes of Practice have been criticised for their ambiguity about ‘sufficient time’ for SENCos to complete duties which ‘may include’ a variety of ever-changing aspects relating to the role (DfE & DoH, 2015; Dobson & Douglas, 2020; Smith & Broomhead, 2019). Subsequently, research has recommended that statutory time should be introduced for those working as SENCos, which may work in conjunction with the Department for Education’s ‘Recruitment and Retention Strategy’ which involves reducing teacher workload (Esposito & Carroll, 2019; Curran et al., 2018; DfE, 2019).
Another aspect of SENCo’s responsibilities which has developed in response to the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) is that of liaising with parents and collaborating with them to support their child through appropriate educational provision (Dobson & Douglas, 2020; Kearns, 2005; Maher, 2016). The relationship between SENCos and parents has been considered by Maher (2016), who discusses the unique power dynamic whereby decisions about a child’s provision are carefully negotiated, with some SENCos able to exercise greater professional judgement than others. In particular, the SENCos interviewed by Maher (2016) stressed the importance of maintaining an honest, supportive and collaborative dialogue with parents in order to ensure that pupils’ needs would be regularly evaluated and met (Boesley & Crane, 2018; Esposito & Carroll, 2019; Maher, 2016). However, the strength of parent and SENCo relationships may be strained for those SENCos who work part-time, as the opportunities for regular meetings to discuss children’s needs are limited (Dobson, 2019).

Additionally, the role of the SENCo as an ‘expert’ who provides advice to both parents and other professionals is evidenced, despite SENCos not always identifying themselves as such (Kearns, 2005; Norwich, 2010; Smith & Broomhead, 2019) and the latest SEND Code of Practice emphasising their strategic whole-school role (DfE & DoH, 2015). In relation to this, research has considered the role of the National Award for SEN Coordination (NASENCO), a postgraduate qualification at Master’s level, in increasing knowledge and self-efficacy in the area of SEND and the statutory processes associated with the SENCo role (Dobson, 2019; Esposito & Carroll, 2019; Passy et al., 2017). The requirement for the SENCo to hold the NASENCO award within three years of commencing the role (Done et al., 2015) also contributes to their ‘expert’ status among staff and parents (MacKenzie, 2007; NASUWT, 2018; Smith & Broomhead, 2019). Additionally, SENCos are expected to provide expertise that can support teachers in their statutory duty to be responsible and accountable for the progress of their pupils with SEND, as reinforced in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015). However, Done et al. (2016) found their sample of SENCos who had completed the NASENCO award were more likely to have whole-school organisational responsibilities. It has been argued that SENCos are key in working with school leadership, staff and parents to establish and continually maintain an inclusive culture within their school (Maher & Vickerman, 2018; Pearson et al. 2015; Wharton et al., 2020).
Historically, SEND Codes of Practice have incorrectly assumed that the statutory school SENCo will be within the school leadership team and, therefore, able to fulfil a strategic whole-school leadership role (Dobson, 2019; Done et al., 2016; Pearson et al., 2015). Despite policy indicating that the role is primarily strategic, managerial aspects must often be carefully balanced with leadership responsibilities to ensure that school practice and policy work towards providing an inclusive education for pupils with SEND (Pulsford, 2019). Hence, the statutory description of the SENCo role differs significantly from its execution in practice, in settings where pragmatic factors, including a lack of time and resources, are significant pressures for SENCos (Boesley & Crane, 2018; Dobson & Douglas, 2020; Esposito & Carroll, 2019). The SENCo role is complex and defined by practices that can affect the self-efficacy of these postgraduate-level professionals (Passy et al., 2017; Smith & Broomhead, 2019).

The SENCo as manager and/or leader
Despite the ‘expert’ role which SENC os may be identified with by school colleagues, the associated status is unclear and inconsistent (Curran et al., 2017; Pulsford, 2019). The role of the SENCo within senior leadership teams has been problematised through research outlining several complexities. Firstly, policy recommendations, including the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee (2006) and subsequent SEND Codes of Practice (including the current statutory version; DfE & DoH, 2015), explicitly suggest or infer that SENC os should hold a situational and organisational leadership position in order to ensure that an inclusive school culture is generated and sustained (Done et al., 2017; Esposito & Carroll, 2019). Notably, Coleman (2020) identified that a SENCo’s position within a senior leadership team was indicative of a school’s commitment to inclusive values and practices, and to sustaining an inclusive school culture. Despite this, studies have found that not all SEN C Os are placed within senior management teams, thereby restricting their ability to undertake a strategic or organisational role whereby whole-school practices can be influenced (Pearson et al., 2015). Consequently, this inconsistency suggests that the SENCo role will be interpreted differently depending on how the role is defined in relation to school context, leading to their work being measured against varying professional standards alongside the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015; Dobson, 2019).

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

**Pressures on SENCos in the Covid-19 pandemic**

With regard to school-based provision, SENCos have been part of the team of professionals responsible for enacting ‘reasonable endeavours’ and completing Covid-19 risk assessments for pupils with SEND to ensure suitable access to education during the pandemic and full opening of schools in September 2020 (DfE, 2020b; Wedell, 2020). Professionals in schools have received regular guidance with updates from the Department for Education. John Coughlan, CEO of Hampshire County Council, reports that prior to 22 July 2020, approximately 200 pieces of guidance had been released to schools, which was considered to be onerous for those working in education (House of Commons Education Committee, 2020b, Q930). The Department for Education has shown some awareness of the inequalities highlighted by the pandemic, including measures such as allocating laptops and mobile internet connections to ‘disadvantaged pupils’ (DfE, 2020d). Notably, this group of pupils disproportionately includes pupils with SEND who are more likely to be eligible for free school meals (Shaw et al., 2016; DfE & ONS, 2018). It should be noted that, at the time of writing, research is continually emerging about the educational impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children, young people and their families, including those with SEND who may have been disproportionately affected. This also applies to the adaptations that may have been made by local authorities and other education professionals.
Pupils with SEND have experienced educational disparities during the initial lockdown period and throughout the Covid-19 pandemic (Disabled Children’s Partnership, 2020; House of Commons Education Committee, 2020a, Q690). Department for Education advice has focused on pupils with SEND being risk-assessed both prior to returning to partially opened schools during the lockdown and during the full opening of schools in September 2020 (DfE, 2020a). This ever-changing guidance has been provided to school leadership teams who have had to react rapidly while balancing the needs of their diverse school communities and the emerging needs of all pupils (Wedell, 2020). With regard to the role of the SENCo during and following the Covid-19 pandemic, it is clear that both managerial and leadership responsibilities will need to be carefully balanced (Pearson et al., 2015; Pulsford, 2019) with the advocacy role that is now increasingly demanded of SENCos, given the inequities described above. Managerial aspects have included the completion of Covid-19 risk assessment for pupils with SEND, as previously mentioned, and leadership aspects have included those related to impact assessment and external scrutiny (Wedell, 2020). Furthermore, the NASENCO award learning outcomes do not currently include specific mention of training in emergency or crisis planning but, instead, are concerned with the planning, implementation and continual review of special educational needs provision (NCTL, 2014). Questions are consequently raised as to whether SENCos, with their postgraduate-level training, will be adequately utilised as a resource to support Covid-19 school planning. Additionally, the level of SENCo involvement in the allocation of resources (including laptops, as previously mentioned) is unclear.

With regard to how SENCos support young people and their families during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is apparent that SENCos may have to liaise with parents who have had negative experiences of accessing school-based provision during lockdown and may be considering home education alternatives, which have attracted increasing interest in recent years (Maxwell et al., 2020). Notably, prior research has identified the growing trend in home education, with parents citing a lack of support, provision not deemed to be inclusive, and concerns over their child’s mental health and well-being. It has subsequently been suggested that the notion of parents as consumers through school choice is a myth for those who have children with special educational needs (Children’s Commissioner, 2019; Kendall & Taylor, 2016; O’Connell, 2019; Parsons & Lewis, 2010).
The SENCo as ‘advocate’

In seeking to facilitate inclusive education within these existing tensions, SENCos may act primarily as advocates for young people with SEND and their families. Rosen-Webb (2011) suggests that SENCos may not identify themselves as ‘altruistic’, but their experiences clearly evidence a value base of actively caring and acting in the best interests of others. This care-based advocacy role is also implied in Kearns’s (2005) pupil-centred ‘rescuer’. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this advocacy role has been brought into sharp relief as the activities of the SENCo increasingly reflect a prioritisation of advocacy in order to maintain an inclusive ethos and support for pupils and their families who are at risk of greater marginalisation. If the SENCo role changes to the point where whole-school leadership such as school culture are viewed as being of lesser importance following the Covid-19 pandemic, then questions are raised as to who will advocate for pupils with SEND and ensure that they experience an inclusive education (Done et al., 2017; Esposito & Carroll, 2019). Hallett and Hallett (2018) have noted that, due to the existing managerial and leadership pressures experienced by SENCos, they may struggle in their ‘rescuer’ role, as all teachers are considered responsible for the needs of all pupils they teach. Nevertheless, the role of the school SENCo should be considered in relation to advocacy actions taken during the pandemic and lockdown, and when preparing the school community for post-pandemic conditions, to ensure that all pupils receive appropriate and inclusive provision (either through distance learning or in the classroom) (Daniels et al., 2020; Wedell, 2020).

Conclusions

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

Significantly, existing pressures experienced by SENCos, related to time, workload, and the exact remit and status of their role, may be exacerbated due to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly through the process of risk-assessing all pupils with EHCPs prior to full opening in September 2020 (Pearson et al., 2015; Weddell, 2020). This suggests that, in response to the pandemic, the SENCo role will involve an increasing number of managerial and administrative tasks, with limited capacity to ensure inclusive policy and practice is being implemented at a whole-school level (Curran, 2019; Smith & Broomhead, 2019).

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

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