This research focuses on the impact of the context of Covid-19 on the role of the SENCo in English schools. The SENCo's role is a contested field; however, the current Special Educational Needs Code of Practice identifies 11 key areas of SENCos' work. A widely distributed survey was used to access the voice of SENCos across the country, and received 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 indicated that practice in this context had changed in some key areas, and also identified three new aspects of the SENCo role. These point to the need to revise policy and guidance relating to the SENCo being part of the senior leadership team, providing emotional support for adults, and engaging in practical pedagogical activities.

Key words: SENCo, Covid, realistic evaluation, special educational needs co-ordinator

Introduction
The work of the SENCo in England is an area of ongoing discussion within the context of a special educational needs system that has recently been
widely critiqued as not being fit for purpose. 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 23 March 2020, as a result of Covid-19 restrictions, schools in the UK were widely viewed as closing. However, most schools remained operational, providing both online learning opportunities and in-school provision for children of key workers and those fitting in to the government’s ‘vulnerable’ category.

Covid-19 has had an extraordinary impact on health, liberty and economic circumstances for very many people (Children’s Society, 2020). 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 six months (Children’s Society, 2020), while 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 special educational needs within the uncharted territory of co-ordinating special educational needs provision during a pandemic lockdown. This context has highlighted issues regarding pupil mental health, well-being and progress, while in relation to provision for pupils with SEND, the issues include the implications of the relaxation of special educational needs 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 two months, and thus the participants had developed patterns of working upon which they could reflect and report. In SENCos’ responses to the research, learners were referred to as ‘pupils’, so this terminology is used throughout the article. The term ‘parents’ is used to include carers with parental responsibility, and ‘governors’ to refer to both governors and holders of other voluntary governance positions, such as trustees.

**Literature review**
The SENCo is identified within the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice as the person within a school or setting who holds responsibility for the co-ordination of day-to-day operationalisation of the special educational needs policy, provision and practice for pupils identified with special educational needs, including those with Education, Health and Care Plans
SENCo: an evolving and complex role

The SENCo’s role originated in the first Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) and has been recognised as having metamorphosed over time (Cowne et al., 2019). The SENCo role has seen a paradigm shift over 25 years, from a focus on pedagogy and support for learners to that of strategic leadership (Ekins, 2015). 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 et al., 2019).

Underlying the complex and challenging role of the SENCo (Wearmouth, 2016; Bartram, 2018) is the number and range of responsibilities within the role. Indeed, the demands of the workload and a lack of time and funding are identified by SENCos as negatively impacting on 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, its geographical location, the number of pupils

**Table 1: SEND Code of Practice**

| 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 |

*Source: DfE & DoH (2015, 6.90, pp. 108–109).*
identified with special educational needs, other responsibilities allocated to the SENCo, and the cultural values and beliefs of the school or setting (Cowne et al., 2019), as decided by the contextual leadership and governance (Packer, 2015). Strategic operational leadership is an essential aspect of the SENCo role, and these discrete components of the role need to be carefully balanced (Soan, 2017).

**Strategic leadership for special educational needs and developing a whole-school culture**

Effective leadership and provision for special education is facilitated through whole-school ownership of special educational needs (Boddison, 2018). Thus, while SENCos are the strategic leaders for special educational needs, the understanding that individuals hold about their responsibilities, and whether there is a shared agreement on the specific responsibilities of the SENCo role, act as barriers or facilitators to developing effective practice (Ekins, 2015; Garner, 2018). Vital determinants for whole-school ownership are the inclusion of the SENCo as a member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), and the SLT being resolute in their focus on inclusive practice and empowering continuing 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 Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) requires schools to have an identified governor or sub-committee tasked with overseeing the school’s special educational needs provision. However, scrutiny of the Code of Practice indicates an implicit assumption that governorship takes place within the context and model of local authority maintained schools and fails to reflect the diversity of school governance arrangements. The SENCo needs to be able to work effectively with the governor/trustee who holds responsibility for special educational needs (Packer, 2015; Soan, 2017); this is a reciprocal responsibility in that SENCo and governor need to be committed to working collaboratively for the benefit of pupils with special educational needs. However, effective and regular work with the governor for special educational needs can be a challenge (Soan, 2017).

**Leading colleagues and building capacity**

The SENCo plays an instrumental role in accountability for the progress and quality of learning and teaching for pupils with special educational needs (Packer, 2015). This indicates the importance of school monitoring systems and procedures that include special educational needs, rather than
monitoring of special educational needs being a separate set of processes. This adds weight to the argument that the SENCo should be a member of the SLT (Glazzard et al., 2015).

The SENCo has a part to play in auditing practitioners’ knowledge and skills, and strengthening teachers’ knowledge, understanding and competences for managing diverse learning needs (Cowne et al., 2019), and planning for CPD (Soan, 2017). This should include proactively appraising and addressing their own CPD needs (Cowne et al., 2019; Packer, 2015).

**Deploying resources: human, physical and financial**
SENCos need to have a cogent appreciation of accountability, the available resources (human and physical) and tactics for effective and efficient deployment of those resources to meet the needs of learners with special educational needs (Wearmouth, 2016; Blatchford et al., 2012). This highlights the importance of analysing and understanding data and of advocating for pupils with special educational needs when reviewing pupil progress and planning approaches (Soan, 2017).

**SENCo: working in partnership and acting as advocate**
Working collaboratively in partnership with pupils, parents and external agencies is advocated within the Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015), as is the importance of placing the pupil and their parents at the centre of decision-making processes (Hellawell, 2019). Effective partnership working, while complex and challenging, is vital to support the Graduated Approach and to develop a deep understanding of pupils’ profiles and ensure high-quality provision for them (Packer, 2015). SENCos need a range of approaches and resources to support listening to the views of pupils with special educational needs concerning their learning and aspirations, while being reflective and mindful of the ethics of care within their work (Glazzard et al., 2015; Hellawell, 2019).

**SENCo: management and administration**
Permeating all aspects of the SENCo role is the need for accomplished communication and organisational competences (Cowne et al., 2019), not least to support the managerial and administrative aspects of the role. Curran et al., (2018) identified within their research 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. 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.’

This review of the literature has demonstrated the complexity and multifaceted nature of the role and the wider responsibilities of the community of the school or setting. This is certainly a time when there is an especial need for clarity about roles and responsibilities, and shared ownership for responsibility for special educational needs.

Paradigm and methodology
Paradigm diversity (Denzin, 2008), epistemological pluralism and the view that qualitative and quantitative methods share many commonalities (Johnson & 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 & Tashakkori, 2003), using quantifying data in combination with qualifying data.

In consideration of the changed working practice of schoolteachers during the Covid-19 pandemic 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 (see Appendix 1). 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.

An ethical approach was adopted with reference to the BERA (2018) guidance, and ethical approval was provided through the researchers’ university research ethics panel.

The data analysis approach, coming from the ontological framework of realism, employed realistic evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Realistic evaluation was developed to examine ‘human service practice’ (Kazi, 2003) and reflects on implicit theories within programmes (Linsley, 2019). For this research, the SENCo role is identified as the programme and the outline of the SENCo role in the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) is the core theory that is interrogated (Pawson & 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 & Tilley, 2004). In 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 involves identifying context, mechanism and outcome (Pawson & Tilley, 1997), which are identified in Table 2.

Using this framework, the first stage of analysis was to code responses according to context, mechanism and outcome (Jackson & Kolla, 2012). Stage 2 of the analysis was split into two 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 Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfE & 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 et al., 2015) of the responses. This manual approach enabled an enhanced credibility of the analysis through triangulation between the two researchers.

Findings: mechanisms
Using a deductive approach, the mechanism of the SENCo role was analysed using the eleven themes from the Code of Practice (see Table 1). However, additional mechanisms emerged through the analysis, reflecting the changing responsibilities in practice when leading special educational needs provision. The frequency of these mechanisms provides a snapshot of the SENCos’ key leadership responsibilities during this context.

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 |
Mechanisms from the Code of Practice

Within the participant responses relating to contextual leadership of special educational needs, 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 that SENCos may have omitted to mention.

Emergent mechanisms (not in the Code of Practice)

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

M: ‘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’ [local authority])

N: ‘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: ‘working with senior leaders and governors to strategically develop SEN practice’.

These three emergent responsibilities are not explicit within the 11 Code of Practice themes (Table 1). While the SENCo role of working strategically beyond the responsibilities related to the Equality Act is specifically outlined in section 6.87 of the Code (DfE & 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: 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 included completing Covid-19-related risk assessments, additional reporting, and learning to manage online meetings. SENCos also mentioned that they had no breaks or holidays during lockdown, with one respondent stating, ‘it means the spinning of many plates. Highly demanding and incredibly intense role’.

SENCos 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 on pedagogy and support through working directly with pupils with special educational needs remains part of their responsibilities. This offers divergence from the literature’s reconceptualisation of the SENCo role. It may be that SENCos have stepped into the breach to fulfil roles needed within the school owing to contextual challenges. However, 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).

Providing emotional support to staff, pupils and their families
SENCos indicated that they were supporting the emotional well-being of their SLT and colleagues, pupils and families. Support was provided through well-being packs and newsletters for pupils and families, well-being 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 designated safeguarding lead took place.

The majority of responses about issues raised by pupils with special educational needs or their parents related to parental concerns. Half of the respondents identified the challenge of successful home learning and parents’ concerns about their children’s social, emotional and mental health (SEMH), frequently related to anxiety and returning 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 IT resources at home not enabling schoolwork to be fully accessed. One respondent mentioned ‘Parents feeling inadequate, children refusing to complete learning tasks, behaviour challenges’, which has clear implications for the outcome of providing emotional and practical support to parents, and offers evidence of
the complex and challenging nature of the work in which SENCos engage, in support of parents and pupils (Packer, 2015), particularly within this context.

*Working with senior leaders and governors to strategically develop special educational needs practice*

The survey identified that the special educational needs governor’s own external professional responsibilities negatively impacted on the regularity of communication. Comments included:

‘*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 reported that they had had no contact with the special educational needs governor. A small number indicated regular contact via telephone or online meeting. The focus of communication was to discuss EHCP reviews and report upon numbers and provision for pupils with special educational needs. The context has added to the challenges of developing effective partnerships between special educational needs governors and SENCos (Soan, 2017), which is concerning, given the important role such partnerships play in strategic leadership of special education (Packer, 2015; Soan, 2017).

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 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 the SLT (Cowne et al., 2019; Packer, 2015), the holding of a position on the 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 with senior leaders, colleagues, parents and pupils, and external agencies

When reporting on access to their senior leaders in this context, the majority of responses were positive. However, just under a quarter of participants reported a negative experience, two of whom reported no access to their SLT.

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 special educational needs (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.

SENCos identified that they were engaging in regular communication with parents of pupils with special educational needs 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. Ten SENCos stated that 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.

SENCos reported that they worked to maintain regular communication with external agencies to ensure their engagement with pupils with special educational needs, generally facilitated through online meetings. Educational psychologists were identified as a significant support for SENCos in the context. However, the challenge of maintaining contact with a range of external professionals was reported as being difficult for many. In concurrence with Soan’s (2017) 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 Department for Education (DfE) would have had a direct impact on their ability to advise and lead on operational matters, SENCos were asked their views about this line of communication. Of the 26 respondents, all but one, who stated that it was satisfactory, expressed a negative view. Criticisms were that there were too many communications, that it was poorly timed, and that information was confusing, inconsistent and contradictory. Responses included:

‘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 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. Some expressed the view that communication was insufficient and neglected to consider special educational needs and SENCos. There were reports of inconsistencies between different local authorities and different internal departments.

Pupils with SEMH needs
The provision of support to pupils for SEMH needs was highlighted as significant in this context. The most common approach was regular individual contact with those pupils, via phone, online or home visits, usually by the SENCo or other non-teaching staff. One-third of respondents provided specific resources for use at home and just under a third 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 co-ordinating provision
The words planning and support featured heavily in responses, but the overall approach of SENCos to this mechanism is captured by the view that
SENCos were ‘ensuring that pupils with SEN are not forgotten’. The word ensuring had high prevalence within responses concerning this mechanism, which underlines the monitoring and quality assurance aspect of SENCos’ role (Glazzard et al., 2015) and the vital nature of their role in supporting positive changes to practice (Cowne et al., 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. SENCos also drew on other sources to evidence the impact of provision; for example, one stated that ‘TAs’ [teaching assistants’] 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 were the key focus for SENCos’ records in this context. Where annual reviews 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 [annual review], difficult as rural broadband made video calls impossible, phone calls, paperwork shared more calls.’ One SENCo reported on parental involvement with the annual review 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 annual reviews included advice from the local authority (for example: ‘We took advice to defer them from LA [local authority] initially and are trying to hold them before the end of term’) and concerns from parents about holding annual reviews via an online meeting. Seventy-nine percent of SENCos managed to complete annual reviews within this context.
Empowering themselves and others

Responses identified that SENCo’s supported their colleagues with planning learning and teaching for remote learning activities for pupils with special educational needs, and advice regarding resources for specific pupils, including collating lists of resources and links to online materials. Some SENCo’s also planned collaboratively with colleagues to prepare learning activities that pupils with special educational needs could access. SENCo’s supported parents in their new pedagogical role owing to the remote learning situation, by responding to direct requests to support from parents, and by delivering learning packs to vulnerable children.

SENCo’s provided feedback to their colleagues regarding the effectiveness of remote learning activities. This suggests that there are synergies between the SENCo’s advisory and monitoring responsibilities. The challenge of differentiation of work emerged, relating to parental concerns about the appropriateness of work. This suggests an area for policy/guidance development relating to SENCo’s responsibilities to build the capacity of their setting to proactively manage the diverse learning needs of pupils with special educational needs (Cowne et al., 2019).

CPD

Responses identified that SENCo’s 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. Comments included:

‘Very useful to develop knowledge, invaluable during this situation’

‘Helped create direction on what needs to happen next’

Responses identified that SENCo’s 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 with their role in strengthening teachers’ awareness and practice (Cowne et al., 2019), SENCos 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 on well-being for colleagues in addition to topics focused on special educational needs 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.

Individual contact with both pupils and their parents was a key tool in planning for pupils with special educational needs to transition back to school, with several respondents identifying partnership working with parents. One respondent reported that they:

‘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, books, videos and photos were referred to widely. Some respondents reported working with external services and planning a curriculum with a focus on well-being, while the use of risk assessments was also identified as part of the process in planning the return of pupils to school.

In relation to the return of pupils, the concerns most often reported were 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, experiencing difficulties with separating from their parents, and not understanding or managing the need for additional Covid-19 measures and the associated changes in school routines. Participants also reflected on the implications of health and safety concerns about working closely with pupils, particularly those requiring physical
intervention for physiological and pedagogical needs. Concerns regarding a widened attainment gap for pupils with special educational needs were also articulated.

In relation to pupils’ transition to new schools, SENCos described liaising with other schools and with parents to share information and learn about pupils with special educational needs, as a way of informing planning for these transitions. 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, along with positive relationships and communication with pupils and families. Support from senior leaders was highlighted by one-quarter of 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. One SENCo’s response reflected the overwhelming nature of the context:

‘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 the Covid-19 context have been a greater combination of the use of technology to facilitate meetings and other communications, challenged by barriers relating to digital poverty. Increased concern was expressed for pupils and the consequences for their return to school in September, relating to pupils’ learning, mental health and well-being, and safeguarding, all of which were perceived to have increased as issues 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 role of the SENCo within this context. While the majority of SENCo time was related to the mechanisms of overseeing and co-ordinating provision, advising colleagues and liaising with other settings and external agencies, three factors that are a challenge to policy and guidance on the role of the SENCo have been identified, as follows.

**Hands-on work of the SENCo**

Planning, teaching and managing were identified as a significant part of the SENCo role, although this aspect is not recognised by the Code of Practice terminology of ‘overseeing’ and ‘advising’ (DfE & DoH, 2015).

**SLT membership**

SENCos who reported successful enactment of their roles in this context highlighted the value of being part of the school SLT, an aspect of the role that is not currently mandated in legislation.

**Supporting adults**

SENCos reported providing emotional support and sustenance to staff and parents. While this need may have been increased by the context, this nurturing approach to ensuring the well-being of the adults who support pupils with special educational needs 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, at a time when many pupils with special educational needs were not physically attending schools. Parents needed significant SENCo support, enacted through frequent and regular contact, to enable them to support their children effectively.
The findings of this research may contribute to current reviews of the legislation and guidance relating to the SENCo role and support reflective practice in individual settings, as a complement to wider-scale studies such as the annual National SENCo Survey.

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

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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 of 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 to 45%, 46 to 60%, 61 to 75%, 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 to 45%, 46 to 60%, 61 to 75%, 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?