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Done, Elizabeth J.; Knowler, Helen

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Exclusion and the strategic leadership role of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in England: planning for COVID-19 and future crises

Elizabeth J. Done and Helen Knowler

Plymouth Institute of Education, University of Plymouth, Drake Circus, Plymouth, PL4 8AA.

Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter, St Luke's Campus, Heavitree Road,

Exeter, EX1 2LU. Tel. +44 (0)1392 724934. Corresponding author:

elizabeth.done@plymouth.ac.uk Orchid identifier 0000-0001-6627-1928

Abstract

A small-scale study funded by the British Educational Association (BERA Small Awards 2020) investigated the role of SENCOs in England immediately prior to, during and following the first closure of schools nationally in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A mixed methods research strategy comprising semi-structured interviews and a national online survey generated data related to SENCOs' involvement in strategic planning for crisis conditions, focusing specifically on students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and concerns around exclusionary practices. Findings suggest that pandemic conditions have exacerbated familiar issues related to the SENCO role and SEND provision in English schools, e.g. engagement in reactive firefighting, onerous workloads, uneven SENCO involvement in strategic planning, and schools' failure to prioritise students with SEND. Minimal evidence of 'advocacy leadership' or of SENCOs challenging exclusionary practices was found. Disparities between anecdotal and published data around illegal exclusion found in earlier research were also evidenced.

Key words: SENCOs; strategic crisis planning; school exclusion; off rolling

Introduction

Background

The reported study is one of an ongoing series of small-scale collaborative research projects undertaken by researchers at the Universities of Plymouth and Exeter that focus on exclusionary practices in schools in England and the perspectives of varied stakeholders on illegal exclusionary practices (Done & Knowler, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021; Done et al., 2021). It was anticipated that the unique conditions presented by the closure of schools nationally in response to the CV-19 pandemic, accompanied by partial re-opening for children classified as 'vulnerable' (Department for Education [DfE] & Williamson, 2020a, 2020b), might lead to increased levels of exclusion (Daniels et al., 2020, p.1). It was hypothesised that marginalised groups would be at particular risk of 'off rolling' (illegal removal from a school roll) during this period since encouraging or pressurising parents to home school, for example,

constitutes an illegal exclusionary practice (Daniels & Cole, 2010; Gill et al., 2017; Ofsted, 2019). The expectation was that the home schooling mandated for the majority of school students during national lockdown would create conditions that might be exploited by schools inclined to engage in such practices (Clarke & Done, 2021). Illegal exclusion in English schools has been reported since 2011 (Children's Commissioner, 2011, 2020) and the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA, 2017) identified 'coerced home education' as a concern in some areas of England.

It was also anticipated that children returning to school following lockdown, and finding adjustment to a school environment difficult, might be formally excluded on the legal grounds of 'persistent disruptive behaviour'. Research prior to the pandemic undertaken by YouGov (2019) on behalf of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) had found that some schools exaggerate accounts of negative behaviour in order to justify the exclusion of poorly performing students. In relation to SEND, the difference between challenging behaviour linked to a specific disability or condition and 'persistent disruptive behaviour' can be misunderstood (Armstrong, 2019). Requests made under the Freedom of Information Act (Ministry of Justice, 2000) by No More Exclusions (NME, 2021) shows that 13,286 exclusions were recorded in only 34 secondary and 39 primary schools between September 2019 and November 2020. National data for the same period indicated 5,057 permanent exclusions and 310,733 suspensions (DfE, 2021). Children transferred through 'managed moves' to other schools, or relocated to PRUs (pupil referral units), are not included in these figures. Daniels et al. (2020, p.2) found that some schools had been 'encouraged to rescind permanent exclusions and opt instead for a managed move with no return', and Done and Knowler (2020) argue that the introduction of 'managed moves' effectively legitimises an exclusionary process wherein parents are at risk of being pressurised by schools into endorsing such a move. The NME (2021) data highlights the issue of disproportionality as children with SEND, those in receipt of FSM (free school meals) and those from specific ethnic groups are significantly over-represented and it is very likely that these groups are similarly over-represented in illegal exclusionary practices and in legitimised exclusions such as 'managed moves'. The Timpson Review (DfE, 2019) of school exclusion found a similar disproportionality.

SENCo role

Statutory guidance requires Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCos) in England to provide strategic leadership to ensure a school ethos of inclusivity (DfE, 2015); it assumes that the statutory school SENCo will be a member of the school leadership team and,

therefore, able to fulfil this strategic whole-school leadership role (Dobson, 2019; Done et al., 2016). Coleman (2020) argues that a SENCo's position within a senior leadership team (SLT) is indicative of a school's commitment to inclusive values and practices, and to sustaining an inclusive school culture. However, findings from the reported BERA-funded study, which was initiated in September 2020, confirm that some SENCos are routinely failing to exercise such leadership whether or not they are members of their school's SLT. This suggests that SENCo input to schools' future crisis planning is an area requiring clarification.

It can be argued that both the sustained over-representation of students with SEND in exclusion data and now the CV-19 crisis underline the need for 'advocacy' leadership (Anderson & Cohen, 2015; Clarke & Done, 2021). The study aimed to determine levels of SENCo involvement in SLT decision-making and planning for offsite and onsite provision for 'vulnerable' children during lockdown conditions, and whether working to prevent exclusion or 'off-rolling' was a SENCo priority. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with SENCos, including some based in schools in areas of high social deprivation within the southwest of England where the proportion of children with SEND is relatively high and many households lack the resources required in online provision (Montacute & Cullinane, 2020). A concurrent national quantitative online survey provided contextual data; however, a single national lockdown (March 2020) in England had been envisaged whereas further school closures (in November 2020 and January 2021) over the project timeframe continued to impact SENCos' work and participant recruitment. The unique and challenging context of pandemic conditions, combined with the sensitivity of school exclusions as a research topic, resulted in very small sample sizes. Nevertheless, the insights gained into SENCos' work during this time can inform future research design. The illegality of some exclusionary practices has previously raised concerns around the authenticity of participant responses and levels of understanding of what constitutes an illegal exclusion (Done & Knowler, 2021; Done et al., 2021), and similar concerns arose in the reported study.

The key research questions were: i) how were SENCos involved in planning for offsite and onsite provision for 'vulnerable' children during CV-19 lockdown conditions?, ii) how were SENCos involved in SLT decision-making about post-COVID-19 provision?, and iii) were SENCos working to prevent exclusion and off-rolling during COVID-19 lockdown conditions?

Methods

The University of Plymouth's Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee (Ref. 19/20-293) granted ethics approval and the selected mixed methods research strategy comprised an online national quantitative survey of SENCOs and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was designed to capture both demographic data (e.g. role, SLT status, type and size of setting) and Likert rating scale responses on SENCOs' experiences as the first lockdown progressed. The planned close date of October 2020 was extended to February 2021 due to a poor response (n=31), despite repeated distribution of the survey link by, for example, *nasen* and local SENCO forums. Plans to collect qualitative data via regional focus groups were revised as prospective participants preferred individual interviews on ethical grounds. Sampling was purposive and opportunistic, involving approaches to SENCO networks in the southwest of England, and 8 semi-structured interviews of 45-60 minutes duration were conducted with SENCOs from varied settings and with varying levels of experience via the online platform Zoom (November 2020 to February 2021). Recordings were transcribed using Word Online and data was managed using NVivo software to assist thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Results

The qualitative sample (n=8) comprised six teachers, one head teacher and one deputy head teacher. Four were from mainstream secondary and three from mainstream primary settings; one was from a post-16 independent setting. Four were SLT. Six had over five years' experience as SENCOs. Of the survey respondents (n=31), only 19 were SLT. Both survey and interview data indicated considerable variation in how SENCOs worked within their settings during the first lockdown. In the survey data, although more respondents reported involvement in planning and decision-making than non-SLT colleagues, not all SLT SENCOs reported involvement in general planning prior to lockdown

Pre-lockdown

Only 6 of 31 survey respondents reported involvement in planning for crises prior to the pandemic and 23 reported no such involvement. No evidence was found in the interview data of crisis planning in schools prior to the CV-19 pandemic, regardless of SLT membership or with particular reference to SEND. In the period immediately prior to lockdown and school closures, only 11 survey respondents strongly agreed that they were consulted by senior leaders; 17 were either undecided or disagreed, implying no guaranteed linkage between SLT membership and consultation. Positive responses from the same respondents on their strategic

involvement before lockdown (16 of 21) suggest that strategic dialogue diminished in the days leading up to school closures. Interview responses revealed no understanding of what crisis planning might entail beyond immediate responses to the specific event of CV-19 induced school closure. Here, non-SLT SENCOs were not involved in planning for offsite provision or partial reopening provision for 'vulnerable' pupils, and immediate responses to school closure were perceived as disorganised or chaotic due to inadequate government notice of school closures and lack of preparedness for significantly disruptive events.

"We were making it up as we went along and being very reactive. I was managing the emotions of parents on a daily, no, hourly basis. What is going to happen? Trying to manage those sorts of expectations, when actually we did not have a clue what we were going to do". (Mainstream secondary / SLT)

Survey responses on local authority (LA) support immediately prior to lockdown suggested that, in addition to finding their own school contexts challenging, the majority of respondents were unsupported in providing onsite or offsite provision in contrast to pre-pandemic times.

During-lockdown

Differences between how SENCOs were working prior to and during lockdown were evidenced in survey responses; 18 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were consulted, specifically, on planning for vulnerable students. Whilst overall agreement on the extent of consultation on vulnerable pupils remained the same, more respondents strongly agreed that they were consulted during lockdown, possibly reflecting national media coverage around what constituted 'vulnerable' for schooling purposes during lockdown.

Interview responses around support focused on providing practical and emotional support to parents, particularly in areas of high social deprivation.

"I've got a small team and initially we were on a rota. But it wasn't working for our families. It was too stressful as we weren't meeting their needs [] So, we pulled ourselves back in full time voluntarily and together we were phoning parents. Made contact with each of our families at least once a week, did home visits where we dropped off free school meal parcels, paper copies of the online learning for those who haven't got that facility, and differentiated resources as much of it was too difficult. We did a couple just dropping off some Chromebooks that we knew some children would really need". (Mainstream secondary / Non-SLT).

Survey respondents generally agreed that learners with SEND were prioritised, however, 7 disagreed and 4 were undecided, perhaps unsurprisingly given the identified variation in approaches and planning prior to the lockdown. Additionally, some respondents believed that

provision for pupils with SEND onsite and offsite had diminished during the lockdown period, introducing a tension between the reported prioritisation of SEND pupils' learning and this perceived reduced provision during lockdown.

At interview, inexperienced non-SLT SENCoS identified positive outcomes of lockdown, highlighting the limitations of non-SLT membership in non-pandemic conditions.

“Historically, we've never operated in that way [with a SLT SENCo], but what's changed since lockdown is that we've developed a team around the child approach, so we now have one member of SLT that sits over SEND, student support, and behaviour provision - one member of SLT overseeing all of that. Key members from each of those teams meet every week and we discuss children in a different way. So that's been a real positive that's come out of lock down”. (Mainstream secondary / Non-SLT).

A minority identified improved relationships with parents as a positive outcome.

Post-lockdown

The majority of interviewees raised concerns about mental health and anxiety levels in school populations.

“The backlash is going to come in the first 6 months next year. I think we'll still be trying to navigate our way around what we allow, reasonable adjustments, transitioning back in. It's going to be January to June that we're going to see those students bubble up”. (Teacher post-16 / Non-SLT)

“They didn't have the outlet of being in school. Those five hours in school can sometimes be a godsend for the kids”. (Mainstream secondary / Non-SLT)

Survey responses included some concern around the impact of lockdown on parent-school relationships, however, 24 respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that there were negative impacts that would ultimately affect such relationships. This is an area that warrants further exploration since the cumulative impact of repeated school closures was beyond the scope of the study.

There was some agreement around the ways that this lockdown experience would impact future provision; 17 respondents indicated that provision would be improved following lockdown while 10 remained undecided. Again, this warrants further exploration as it is reasonable to assume that, as SENCoS became accustomed to new ways of working, they would feel more positive.

There was some intensity of feeling around whether SENCoS might advise parents to continue home schooling once lockdown restrictions ended; 25 respondents stated that they would not advise parents to continue home schooling. While no further questions were asked

on this particular issue, this may reflect research literature showing that educators can have negative perceptions of parents' abilities to support their child with SEND at home (Goodall, 2021).

Strategic planning

At interview, only one participant exemplified the proactively strategic SENCo role demanded in statutory guidance (DfE, 2015), referring to a “*vision*” of inclusive school practice and lower exclusion rates that they outlined when appointed to their role some months prior to lockdown. This SLT SENCo was actively involved in planning for partial re-opening provision by the school's head teacher, including the creation of a safe space for children with SEND. Otherwise, both inexperienced and the most experienced SENCos appeared unaware of the distinction between managerial and strategic activities outlined in statutory guidance. One longstanding SENCo (and primary head teacher) exemplified the SENCo role enshrined in historical statutory guidance (of in-house expert).

“I do all the referrals. The SENCo role is so important I just don't feel I can hand it to anyone else. I sometimes think, well, I've got that teaching experience and I want to keep using it so I might as well use it to support children who really need some additional support”. (Mainstream primary / SLT)

Interviewees understood whole school initiatives as organising provision for all pupils (online) and only one participant explicitly referred to students with SEND as a priority in this context.

Exclusionary practices

Only two interviewees were aware of formal exclusions having taken place during lockdown. Survey respondents also reported not having seen any evidence of permanent exclusion in this period and, when asked about exclusion of students with SEND, all disagreed or strongly disagreed that any such students had been excluded during lockdown. This may be due to zero exclusion policies in these settings but, more likely, it reflects the high number of respondents in primary schools where there is generally less fixed term and permanent exclusion reported (DfE, 2020a). The NME (2021) exclusions data cited above introduces a tension between the accounts given at interview or by questionnaire and prevalence data gained through Freedom of Information Act requests. One interviewee commented that formal exclusion was pre-empted in their setting by encouraging students to move to other settings. At interview, understanding of what constitutes ‘off rolling’ varied and two SENCos (one non-SLT) had not encountered this term and claimed to be unaware of such practices. In the survey data, 30 respondents reported not knowing of ‘off rolling’ occurring while one was undecided.

Some interviewees offered comments on a sub-sector or a school other than their own and only one raised performativity pressures contributing to such exclusion.

“I understand why some schools feel that pressure as there's so much responsibility now about your data and if you don't get the right data you can be forced into a certain academy chain and your money might be cut and it's such a huge pressure. In a primary school there is that pressure, but not to the same extent”. (Primary head teacher / SLT)

“When you've got difficult students, you just try to transition them on and pass the buck”. (Mainstream secondary / Non-SLT)

“There is a school well known for permanently excluding or encouraging families to apply to a different school, even going as far as buying the uniform for the transition”. (Mainstream secondary / Non-SLT).

“There are some schools that are a bit prone to off rolling because we take quite a few kids from elsewhere. Rather than putting work into supporting their emotional needs - having key workers, timeout, safe spaces, opportunities to discuss concerns, sometimes it is easier to encourage kids to move on”. (Mainstream secondary / Non-SLT)

“It was happening at a local secondary school. Parents were being actively encouraged to home educate, sign disclaimers to take on the education. Nothing concrete, but a couple of suspicions. I look at the new consultations that come in from the local authority and there does sometimes seem to be a few patterns that arise from certain areas”. (Teacher post-16 / Non-SLT)

An interviewee emphasised the limited availability of specialist provision as encouraging ‘off rolling’.

“A common factor for a lot of schools is this dilemma of a child that is waiting for provision that's already full, so they're off rolling them because that positive experience is now negative or not affective and therefore they are off rolled” (Mainstream secondary / SLT)

Alternative provision was not viewed as exclusionary by interviewees and part-time timetabling was noted as one practice used to avoid immediate exclusion.

“Not in my school. We would look at finding alternative placements for them and working with the local authority rather than fixed terming them”. (Secondary mainstream / Non-SLT).

“We've got some students who are on a part time timetable temporarily and they may go off roll eventually” (Mainstream secondary / SLT)

Only one interviewee raised reducing exclusion as integral to the SENCo role.

“I looked at all those who had some kind of exclusion since September and it was quite alarming how many of them have SEN. It's part of my strategic role. I want to look at that”. (Mainstream secondary / SLT)

A minority of survey respondents were concerned about exclusion for pupils with SEND (3 of 31), Looked After Children (1/ 31) or those receiving FSM (1/ 31) following the re-opening of schools post-lockdown.

Discussion

Whilst the research findings suggest strategic planning was not a key feature of SENCOs' work prior to or during the first national lockdown, educational provision in international contexts has been approached very differently. Further research should explore the extent to which SEND provision globally has been impacted by lockdowns and pandemic measures. The lack of planning exemplified by responses in this small-scale study are likely to be reflective of a wider lack of preparation by schools across England for crisis scenarios. In contrast, following the SARS outbreak on 2003, Singapore adopted proactive measures such as e-learning and home learning weeks to allow for flexibility of provision should an outbreak recur (Ministry of Education, 2020); reports from professional networks suggest that this translated into less disruption generally and less time out of school for pupils. In Dubai, a 'flexi schooling' approach that had been previously been introduced meant that schools and parents were more accustomed to integrating home schooling (Masudi, 2018). Clearly, these countries are working with much smaller school populations and greater resources, however, they demonstrate that working in crises in education contexts is not a universally novel phenomenon and precedents exist which warrant further consideration.

In England, SLT have been obliged to respond rapidly to an ever-changing guidance landscape while striving to balance the needs of diverse school communities and the emerging needs of all students (Wedell, 2020). Additionally, those with more complex needs and Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans (Ashbury et al., 2020; DfE, 2020b) were assured through emergency legislation of continuing provision with adaptations to Section 42 of the Children and Families Act 2014; here, 'best endeavours' became 'reasonable endeavours' (Daniels et al., 2020; DfE, 2020b). However, discrepancies between local authorities' interpretations of 'endeavours' have been identified, indicating that students with SEND and EHC plans have experienced wide variation in levels of provision throughout the pandemic (De Winter, 2020). Interviewees in the reported study did not refer to EHC plans but, rather, to onerous risk assessments that determined whether 'vulnerable' children could attend the

partially re-opened school setting. The interviewee that referred to insufficient differentiation in offsite learning materials echoed the concerns of Daniels et al. (2020) around differentiation for students with SEND. Future crisis planning must address such issues. It is likely that SENCOs will be dealing with student anxiety, mental health and well-being issues which may conflict with school efforts around academic ‘catch up’ in the post-pandemic landscape (Daniels et al., 2020; DfE, 2020b; Education Policy Institute, 2020).

The recommendations outlined briefly below assume that issues around SENCO workload and training are addressed to avoid simply adding to workload pressures (Done et al., 2016; Curran et al., 2018). Time pressures arise when the role is combined with class teaching and / or school management responsibilities (Dobson, 2019) and were compounded by the requirement to risk assess all pupils with EHC plans prior to full opening in September 2020 (Wedell, 2020). This underlines the need for routine crisis planning as integral to the SENCO role and for the re-organisation of additional managerial and administrative tasks so that SENCOs have time to ensure that inclusive policy and practice is implemented at a whole-school and individual level (Curran, 2019). The risk otherwise, as Daniels et al. (2020) have suggested, and the NME (2021) report appears to confirm, is that exclusionary practices are likely to increase (Clarke & Done, 2021) with students with SEND becoming increasingly marginalised in school communities (Graham et al., 2019).

Limitations

Data analysis was complicated by repeated lockdowns during the data collection period. The poor response rate to the online questionnaire meant that findings lacked statistical validity.

Recommendations

An implication of the findings outlined above for policymakers is that legislation should be introduced that requires all SENCOs to be members of the school SLT and undertake crisis planning for students with SEND. Such a requirement would be included in statutory guidance and mandatory accreditation (National Award for SEN Coordination) syllabi; the NASENCO award learning outcomes do not currently include specific mention of training in emergency or crisis planning but focus on planning, implementation and continual review of special educational needs provision (NCTL, 2014).

Additionally, government-funded sabbaticals for SENCOs would permit study related to leadership, ‘advocacy leadership’ (Anderson & Cohen, 2015) and strategic planning, particularly for SENCOs in areas of high social deprivation and where marginalised groups are

statistically over-represented. The latter accords with a House of Commons Education Committee (2020) report highlighting geographic inconsistencies and their exacerbation 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’.

Conclusions

The statutory expectation that the SENCo role is primarily strategic is contradicted when its execution in practice is explored (Clarke & Done, 2021). Factors such as lack of time and resources are significant pressures for SENCos (Dobson & Douglas, 2020; Esposito & Carroll, 2019), and these pressures will, undoubtedly, inhibit possibilities for the ‘advocacy leadership’ that is now required if students with SEND are not to become an increasingly marginalised group (Clarke & Done, 2021). Further implications of this study for SENCos are that greater awareness is required of what constitutes illegal exclusionary school practice and of their own role in minimising both legal and illegal exclusionary practices. SENCos should play a pivotal role in the integration of safeguarding practices and disciplinary frameworks.

The COVID-19 pandemic has both highlighted and exacerbated familiar issues related to SEND provision in English schools, including the apparent reluctance of an, as yet, unknown proportion of SENCos to challenge exclusionary practices and inconsistencies around inclusive practice (Done et al., 2021). The post-pandemic period presents an opportunity to thoroughly review educational priorities in relation to students with SEND and marginalised social groups. This would include critical examination of the self-evident tensions between routine exclusionary practices and the right to education, and between the strategic objective of maintaining an inclusive whole-school ethos whilst supporting or condoning exclusionary practices affecting students that are in particular need of support.

The paucity of evidence of strategic planning prior to CV-19 induced school closures in England stands in contrast to countries where earlier pandemics have prompted plans that can be rapidly operationalised in the event of future crises. The experiences of SENCos (or equivalents) internationally could be illuminating and facilitate discussion around crisis planning and strategic planning that mitigates the need for reactive firefighting. The personal and professional challenges that have confronted SENCos during the COVID-19 pandemic should not be underestimated, and the efforts of school staffs to support students and their families should be acknowledged. However, the findings of the reported study have highlighted

weaknesses around strategic planning and inclusive practice during the period immediately preceding and following the first pandemic-induced school closures in England.

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