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The experience of SENCOs in England during the COVID-19 pandemic: the amplification and exposure of pre-existing strengths and challenges and the prioritisation of mental health and wellbeing in schools.

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Abstract

A national survey of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in England was conducted during the summer of 2020 in the midst of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The annually conducted survey typically collates demographic data about the SENCO workforce, but given the wider context, this particular survey also included nine questions about SENCOs' experiences during the pandemic. More than 1000 SENCOs participated in the survey and the findings demonstrate the critical contribution of SENCOs in supporting pupils with SEND and maintaining effective communication with their families during the pandemic.

The study provides evidence of an amplification effect in relation to the strengths and challenges that SENCOs had been experiencing prior to the pandemic. The study also demonstrates the importance of prioritising mental health and wellbeing in schools for both pupils and staff in the wake of the pandemic, with this being the key priority identified by SENCOs across all types of setting and all phases of education.

Keywords

SENCO, COVID-19, pandemic, mental health, wellbeing, schools.

Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (hereafter referred to as the ‘pandemic’) has brought major disruption to schools across England since March 2020. During the first lockdown in March 2020 schools initially remained open for vulnerable children, particularly those with the most complex special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Following the wider re-opening of schools in September 2020, a subsequent lockdown followed in early 2021 for a period of two months. This period of educational turbulence is likely to have had a long-term impact on all school-aged children (Townsend, 2020). Specifically, for children with SEND, their school is likely to be a key place from which they receive academic support and access therapeutic services in order to meet their needs and optimise their educational outcomes (Department for Education (DfE) and Department of Health (DoH) 2015), yet reports have shown that the pandemic significantly impacted on this access (Tirraoro, Blower and Keer, 2020).

In all school systems, there has been a sustained disparity in the educational opportunities available to different groups of pupils (Nash, 2010, p7). In England, there have long been concerns that learners with SEND do not have the same experience and quality of education as learners without SEND (Warnock, 1978; 2019). Factors which contribute to these concerns include the strategic decisions made at national level by policy makers, with some arguing that there are tensions between policies for inclusion and those aimed at increasing academic attainment (Ellis and Tod, 2014). The pandemic has arguably tested the willingness of policy makers to prioritise the most vulnerable in our school system, including learners with SEND. This is an area that merits further attention since the implications of insufficient prioritisation for learners with SEND in the context of the pandemic may be more acute and for some children, such as those with complex medical needs, fatal (Alexander et al, 2020).

Within schools in England, it is the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) who provides the day-to-day strategic leadership of SEND provision (DfE & DoH 2015, p108). It is therefore a reasonable assumption that SENCOs have played a central role in seeking to ensure that children with SEND were appropriately supported during the pandemic.

To better understand the experiences and roles of SENCOs during the pandemic, a national survey of SENCOs was undertaken, building on the work of two previous national surveys (Curran et al, 2018; 2020). The intention was to explore the challenges faced by SENCOs, but also to capture the innovation and effective practice employed by SENCOs so that this learning is retained into the future. This study reports on the pandemic-related key findings from the perspective of SENCOs.

The survey was conducted at the start of the academic year 2020, and asked SENCOs to reflect on their experiences within their schools during the initial lockdown, through to the reopening to the wider school population in September 2020. The survey received over 1000 responses. The data suggested that SENCOs experienced several challenges during this period, including ensuring access to virtual learning for learners with SEND, the completion of risk assessments for learners with Education, Health and Care plans (EHCPs) and their capacity to support teachers with differentiation. However, despite the challenges, the research suggested that during this period SENCOs focused on developing their relationships with families; something SENCOs hoped to maintain moving forward. The research indicated that many of the pre-existing challenges within the system had been amplified due to the pandemic, yet equally opportunities to reflect on and adapt their approach and provision for learners with SEND were concurrently presented.

The Role of the SENCO

The role of the SENCO is of pivotal importance in schools, and this is emphasised by the fact that the only two roles legally required in a school are the SENCO and the Headteacher and, of these two roles, only the SENCO is required to be a qualified teacher (Yates & Boddison, 2020, p29). The SENCO is expected to focus on both operational and strategic aspects of the role, with ‘an important role to play with the headteacher and governing body, in determining the strategic development of SEN policy and provision in the school’ (DfE and DoH, 2015, p. 108). The role is described as having significant responsibility regarding support for SEND in schools (Griffiths and Dubsky, 2012), whilst concurrently seeking to develop inclusive practice within the setting (Curran and Boddison, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, Hellowell asserted that SENCOs are expected to offer ‘straightforward advice’ when faced with complex situations (2019, p. 15). Presently it could be argued that the pandemic has been one of the most complex issues that schools in England have ever faced.

Yet an enduring challenge for the facilitation of the SENCO role has been the way in which it is enacted at a local level (Dobson and Douglas, 2020). Despite the statutory requirements related to the role, including the post holder having both Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and attaining the National Award for SEN Coordination (DfE and DoH, 2015), the role is widely reported to lack time and status (Curran et al., 2018; Smith and Broomhead, 2019). Such variance has led to SENCOs reporting, pre pandemic, that they do not have enough time to fulfil the responsibilities of the role and that they are not always able to ensure that children are receiving the provision that they need (Curran and Boddison, 2021). Additionally, SENCOs reported that they often drawn away from SENCO tasks to support other needs within school (Curran et al., 2018).

Mental Health and Wellbeing; a SENCO priority?

In response to the pandemic, a variety of measures were mandated at local and national levels with the aim of protecting the health of the school population in England (DfE, 2021). The measures included full and partial school closures, social distancing, the use of face coverings, social bubbles and restrictions on free movement within school sites. Whilst such measures may have provided a level of protection for the physical health of children by reducing the risk of contracting the coronavirus, several studies have warned about the potential unintended detrimental impact on children's mental wellbeing (Brooks et al, 2020; Ougrin, 2020).

Social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) is one of the four broad areas of need defined within the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH 2015, p85), and therefore falls within the remit of the SENCO to coordinate provision for learners with these needs. If the warnings about an increase in SEMH needs in schools prove to be right, then this may present a challenge for SENCOs in managing both the scale and complexity of the emerging distribution of needs within the pupil population within an already time pressured role (Curran et al., 2018).

The Children and Families Act (Gov UK, 2014) sets out clear expectations for multi-agency collaboration between education, health and social care professionals (Boesley & Crane, 2018). However, prior to the pandemic there were already concerns about the lack of consistent participation from health professionals in reviewing support for children with EHCPs (Craston, Thom, & Spivack, 2015). Additionally, the pandemic has presented significant challenges to all parts of society, particularly the health profession. With the ongoing challenges related to the pandemic, couple with pre-existing challenges with the system, this suggests that the SENCO may find in the longer term that their responsibility for SEMH will increase.

A digital revolution?

Prior to the pandemic, it was argued by Wedell (2019, p27) that digital technologies were being used to introduce greater flexibility into the traditional school experience. The pandemic has

forced many teachers and school leaders to accelerate their use of digital technologies. However, historically there has been a ‘digital inequality’ for learners with SEND (Seale, 2020, p. 263), with Ofsted (2020) raising concerns regarding how learners with SEND were engaging with remote learning during the pandemic stating that additional learning arrangements were not routinely provided as part of the wider access to remote learning during this period. This suggests that the concerns raised by the SEND Inquiry (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019), particularly regarding provision for SEN Support, have been amplified due to the pandemic.

From the perspective of the SENCO, whilst the use of digital technologies may be useful in providing a remote education offer for all pupils, there are growing concerns about the positive correlation between the increased use of technology and the increase of SEMH symptoms in children and young people (Lattie, Lipson, & Eisenberg, 2019). Indeed, a systematic review and meta-analysis has identified a ‘consistent relationship’ between the inappropriate use of smartphones and a variety of SEMH symptoms (Sohn et al, 2019). Paradoxically, researchers from the United States argue that increased use of technology is necessary to tackle the emerging global crisis in SEMH and are calling for a ‘digital mental health revolution’ (Figueroa & Aguilera, 2020). Both views present potential challenges, and opportunities, for SENCOs with regards to supporting children with SEMH difficulties.

Research design

The design of this national survey mirrors the design of two previous national surveys, which were developed following two pilot surveys and user testing (Curran and Boddison, 2021). This aim of this study is to provide a voice for SENCOs to share their experiences of supporting pupils during the pandemic and it reports data on the key emerging priorities for SENCOs. It comprises a combination of question types, including multiple choice, ranking, Likert scale

and free text responses, which improve the validity of the findings by providing contextual information to support the statistical data analysis (Punch & Oancea, 2014).

An online survey of 35 questions was created for SENCOs in England to complete. It was promoted on social media as well via the membership of nasen (National Association for Special Educational Needs). With more than 24,000 schools in England, and therefore more than 24,000 SENCOs, this promotion is important. The greater the number of SENCOs completing the survey, the more representative the sample and the greater the reliability of the findings (Bryman, 2012).

Whilst most questions were focused on demographic, workload, training, support and local logistics, there were nine questions that sought to specially draw out SENCOs' experiences during the pandemic. Overall, the questions explored the following themes:

- Providing support in the setting for children/young people (YP) with EHCPs including the management of risk assessments
- Virtual support for children/YP with EHCPs and SEN Support (children with SEN who do not have an EHCP)
- Children/YP access to IT hardware at home
- Children/YP access to regularly used equipment (e.g., therapeutic tools/toys)
- Children/YP able to access appropriately differentiated work online, including teacher support for this provision
- Communication with parents and children/ YP
- The digital literacy of the school

The questions also asked SENCOs to reflect on the support they received both internally and externally as well as their emerging priorities and any anticipated long-term impact of the pandemic on the practical reality of their role.

The research project followed the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018), with ethical approval granted by the research team's institution. Consent was requested from participants for their response data to be used and reported as part of the research project. Participants could withdraw up until they submitted their responses, without giving a reason. No data that might reveal the identity of the individual was collected and all responses to the survey have been reported anonymously.

In analysing the responses to all nine questions, the SENCO demographic data could be used to filter the results by educational phase, geographical region and the type of school/setting. The responses to some questions used a five-point Likert scale and the subsequent analysis sought to identify trends or significant differences between different groups of SENCOs. Open coding (Williams & Moser, 2019) was used to identify emerging themes from free text responses. One question asked SENCOs to identify their top three priorities from a list of 12 options (including other) and weighted rank scoring was used for the analysis, with average weighted rank scores being used to make comparisons between groups of responses of unequal sizes.

Results

The survey results are based on the 1022 responses from participants who consented for their data to be analysed, who identified as a SENCO working in a school or educational setting in England. Some participants chose not to respond to all questions, so the response rates vary from $n=1005$ to $n=1022$.

The total population of school-based SENCOs in England is around 24,000. In drawing conclusions about SENCOs in general on the basis of the minimum sample size of respondents for each question ($n \geq 1005$), there is 99% confidence that the reported statistics from this survey are within a 4% confidence interval of the wider SENCO population in England.

A total of 84.4% of respondents stated that they were currently working in a mainstream school. Sixteen respondents (1.6%) worked in a special school and 20 respondents (2%) worked in alternative provision or a pupil referral unit (PRU). A total of 2.6% stated that they worked across multiple settings, whilst 5.2% of respondents described their setting as an early years or nursery setting. Nearly two-thirds (63.7%) reported that they worked in the primary phase. Just over a quarter worked in a secondary setting (25.3%). It should be noted here that these categories are not mutually exclusive nor exhaustive, which is representative of the complexity of the range of settings that SENCOs work in.

A total of 42.3% of respondents reported that they worked in a local authority maintained school, with 38.7% working as part of a multi-academy trust (MAT) which is a group of independent state-funded schools. Just under 5% of respondents worked in an independent school (3.7%). Less than 10% worked in a standalone academy (9%) which is a single independent state-funded school.

The findings are reported at a national level with a view to informing national policy decisions, but they are also reported by phase and sector, where the specific priorities are more nuanced, to inform regional and local strategic decision-making.

Challenges Facing SENCOs

With the introduction of the first lockdown in March 2020, risk assessments were required to ensure children with EHCPs were able to have their needs ‘safely met in the educational environment’ (DfE, 2020). Local authorities were asked to work with educational settings in conducting these assessments. 57% of SENCOs who responded to the survey reported challenges in managing risk assessments for learners with EHCPs, citing issues with access to timely, consistent information from local authorities. Despite the challenges of managing risk assessments, 76.5% of SENCOs indicated this was one of their strengths, which may suggest

that SENCOs feel they have responded well to some of the challenges they faced during the pandemic.

Related to managing risk assessments for children with EHCPs, 72% of SENCOs reported that they experienced challenges with providing support for children with EHCPs, although more than half of SENCOs (56.8%) felt this was area of strength. Such challenges were echoed when wider SEND provision was considered. Almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of SENCOs (73.4%) experienced challenges with providing virtual support for pupils with SEND with a variety of views on whether this was an area of strength. Indeed, 25% of SENCOs remain uncertain about the effectiveness of the virtual support they provided during the pandemic. In addition, $\frac{3}{4}$ of SENCOs (72.5%) reported challenges with ensuring that virtual learning was effectively differentiated. More specifically, only 1 in 5 SENCOs in secondary schools (21.5%) indicated that differentiated learning online was a strength, compared to 38.6% of SENCOs in primary schools and 38.9% in special schools.

A commonly recurring theme within the analysis of challenges faced by SENCOs was the availability of and accessibility to information technology (IT). Over half of SENCOs (53.2%) experienced challenges in relation to digital literacy in their schools. This was more acute in special schools, where 69.4% of SENCOs viewed digital literacy as a challenge, which adds a further burden if the IT devices being provided are not adapted to provide access for pupils with specific complex needs. This echoes the concerns about the timely availability of IT hardware for pupils to use at home with 86.1% of SENCOs in special schools viewing this as a challenge compared to the national average of 69.8% for all SENCOs. The issues raised by some SENCOs included:

'It was the end of the academic year by the time students had laptops provided.'

'We've had to strip [empty] the school of laptops and ask for charitable donations and still we didn't have enough for the children who required them.'

The survey suggested that some phases experienced challenges more acutely. A greater proportion of SENCOs in early years settings than school-based SENCOs found it more challenging to communicate with parents (69.6% vs 36.5%) and children (69.7% vs 50.6%) during the pandemic. This contrasts with pre-pandemic research, which suggests that early years SENCOs perceive parental communication both as essential and as a key strength underpinning their effectiveness in the role (Curran, 2020, p7). Overall SENCOs reported that successful communications with parents were maintained in all phases during the pandemic, with 84.2% reporting this as an area of strength.

Support received and provided by SENCOs during the pandemic

When considering the support that SENCOs received during this period, only 1 in 10 SENCOs (10.6%) reported that this was sufficient. The data suggests that SENCOs relied primarily on internal support, for example from senior leadership teams or central MAT team with $\frac{3}{4}$ of SENCOs feeling well supported by senior leaders in their schools (76.7%) and by the wider MAT (71%). However, SENCOs were typically disappointed with the content and availability of external support, for example from local authorities and the central government.

'Schools were left to get on with it with very limited support.'

'I feel schools were very much left to fend for themselves at the beginning of this pandemic and government advice was very unclear.'

SENCOs also raised concerns about the impact of heavy workload on staff wellbeing, as well as their own:

'Responsibility was loaded on to schools through unnecessary administrative reporting tasks which became more damaging to the mental health of an already fragile staff.'

'I worked longer and harder than ever, it felt desperate at times. No support from social services. I felt unable to switch off.'

The survey indicated that a key responsibility for the SENCO during the pandemic was the importance of supporting families, primarily through maintaining communication. The SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) is emphatic regarding the importance of working with families and the survey indicated that this had become one of the most substantive requirements during the pandemic. SENCOs reported positively on the increased focus of this support, noting that they had a greater understanding of the child and families they were working with as a result.

Long-Term Implications for SENCOs

For SENCOs reflecting on how they had undertaken their role during the pandemic and what they might do differently in the future, the most common theme emerging from the data was to have an increased focus on children at the level of SEN Support. Virtual interventions and online differentiation were both areas identified by SENCOs as being important if a similar situation occurs in the future. SENCOs also suggested they would provide more support directly to children as well as more training and planning support for staff.

'A more rigorous approach to ensuring high levels of differentiation was in place to support SEN learners in accessing online portals and the work on them.'

'Support staff to ensure online work was tailored more to the needs of children with SEND.'

Around 2 in 5 SENCOs (41.4%) have confirmed that the pandemic will impact the way in which they undertake the role in the long term, suggested that the pandemic has been a catalyst for change. It is notable that more than 1/3 of SENCOs (35.4%) remain uncertain about whether their practice will change as a result of the pandemic. However, the changes in practice that SENCOs did identify included maintaining the higher levels of communication with parents, the continued use of online meetings and an increasing focus on mental health.

'The relationships built with parents through regular phone calls and communication is something that I do not want to lose. I hope to continue to build upon this as it has been invaluable in building trust, understanding needs and building on a child and family centred approach.'

More than half of SENCOs (53.7%) indicated that they will think differently about the universal offer and access to the curriculum in response to the pandemic with just under ¼ of SENCOs (23.5%) remaining uncertain. Amongst the areas identified as a priority in relation to any changes were having a greater focus on mental health and online provision.

SENCOs ranked their top three priorities for September 2020 onwards and *Table 1* shows the overall priorities as well as the ranking by setting type. The top priority identified by SENCOs across primary, secondary and special schools was mental health and wellbeing and it is notable that both developing the universal offer and working with/supporting families were also within the top 5 priorities (from a possible choice of 12). This triangulates with the areas of their role that SENCOs thought would change post-pandemic and the growing concerns around mental health and wellbeing that SENCOs have identified. Conversely, SENCOs did not rank virtual/online learning or the social impact of the pandemic within their top 5 priorities despite them being key concerns in recent months.

[Table 1 near here]

Discussion

Hellawell argues that the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) has presented a key problem for SEND professionals, including SENCOs, namely ‘the intersection and contradictions between needs and resources’ (2019, p. 24), creating an ethical dilemma when overseeing SEND provision in schools. In agreement, the SEND Inquiry (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019) highlighted the gulf between SEND policy intention and reality. These complications of SEND policy intention versus implementation, alongside an already contested role (Curran and Boddison, 2021), suggests that the added complexity of a pandemic has arguably exacerbated an already difficult role for SENCOs. The following discussion explores the way in which the SENCO enacted and managed their role during this period, identifying both the opportunities and the challenges for their role and for SEND provision in their schools.

The survey suggested that not only were communications with families identified as a key part of the SENCO role during the pandemic, but these were further developed during this period; consequently, developing a more holistic understanding of individual needs, as well as those of the family. This echoes the study by Kim and Asbury (2020) which emphasised the important role strong relationships between staff in schools and families played in relation to securing effective provision for children during this period. The knowledge about the value of such relationships is not new (Mansaray, 2006), however the concern historically was that teachers would become overly dependent on teaching assistants to maintain these relationships instead of taking on the responsibility themselves (Crozier & Davies, 2007), despite the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) clearly stating that the teacher should take the lead. Whilst the findings from Kim and Asbury (2020) suggest that it was teachers who developed new relationships with families during the pandemic, the survey findings from this current study suggest that the SENCO may have developed new relationships with families of pupils

with SEND, as well as strengthening those that existed pre pandemic. Yet it should not be assumed that regular contact with families during this period equated to the satisfactory provision of support. The survey also indicated that SENCOs experienced challenges with providing virtual support for children and young people with SEND during lockdown, with Clarke and Done suggesting that there may be a need to rebuild the relationship between schools and families, due to ‘parents receiving minimal additional support during the lockdown period’ (2021, p. 167). With the findings from the survey indicating that relationships have been focused on, there is potential for the concerns of Clarke and Done to be addressed.

The contribution of such newly developed family relationships should not be underestimated. Fox (2015) suggests that values and expertise are important factors in relation to informing decisions about provision, with Curran arguing that ‘parents are the experts on their child’ (2019, p. 83). The pandemic presented a situation, for some parents, which meant that they ‘reimagined the role of the educator’ (Ludgate, Mears and Blackburn, 2021 p. 8) and, it could be argued, developing their expertise even further. The SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) is empathic regarding the intended involvement and collaboration with parents and the indications are that the pandemic may have provided opportunities for all involved to develop their understanding regarding children’s needs. Additionally, this suggests that the SENCO can retain a level of effectiveness even in the absence of the detailed assessment data they are accustomed to having access to, if they prioritise relationships with parents and carers.

An immediate change which took place at the start of the pandemic was the move to remote and online methods of communication (Middleton and Kay, 2021). The survey findings suggest that this change helped with the aforementioned increase in contact with families. In some cases, the technology has facilitated new approaches to existing problems. For example, there were pre-pandemic challenges in ensuring that health professionals attend annual reviews (Craston, Thom, & Spivack, 2015), but the findings suggest that virtual annual reviews have

improved attendance with some SENCOs reporting they will sustain this new approach beyond the pandemic. Indeed, it could be argued that such changes are essential to address the issues highlighted by the SEND Inquiry which found that ‘in reality health and social care are still not equal partners in the process’ (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019, p. 37). Certainly, operating in non-traditional ways requires a level of responsiveness and entrepreneurialism, which are skills that SENCOs have been demonstrating in recent years (Curran, 2019); suggesting that the SENCO may be well placed within the school system to develop these new ways of working further.

The move to remote and online methods of communication may have also provided benefits for some children and young people with SEND. SENCOs reported that some of their pupils demonstrated a preference for remote learning. Whilst this may perhaps reinforce long-standing arguments that both formal and informal pedagogical practices are routinely required in effective teaching and learning (Greenhow & Lewin, 2018, p12), this should be approached with caution as Ofsted remarks a move to online can ‘only ever be a partial solution’ (2020, p. 30).

Despite the advantages and innovative solutions afforded by virtual approaches, it is important to recognise that this may also be a contributing factor to the mental health and wellbeing issues that pupils have experienced (Lattie, Lipson & Eisenberg, 2019). Concerns regarding the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, including those with SEND, have been raised as a result of their experiences during the pandemic (Ougrin, 2020). Equally, the work of Asbury et al. suggests that during the pandemic children with SEND and their families were more likely to ‘experience poor mental health and to be under substantially greater pressure (2020, p. 1779). A further challenge is the potential impact of accessing materials online. Issues such as webinar fatigue are not isolated to educational settings but have also been impacting businesses during the pandemic (Wiederhold, 2020). The findings from the survey

illustrated that SENCOs across all phases of education and all types of setting identified mental health and wellbeing as their top priority, but also indicates that this needs to be considered across all areas of learning.

With the introduction of the Children and Families Act in 2014, a broader notion of outcomes was envisaged that went beyond academic progress and included the health and wellbeing of children and young people (Curran, 2019). Had this ambition been realised, SENCOs would arguably have been better prepared for the mental health challenges that are clearly emerging as a direct consequence of the pandemic (Ougrin, 2020). However, a criticism of the implementation of the SEND reforms has been the emphasis on educational provision at the expense of health or social care (Boesley & Crane, 2018), indicating a need to rebalance national and local priorities. The Government has introduced funded training for senior mental health leads in schools, with the intention that every school will have a lead in place by 2025 (Department for Health and Social Care & DfE, 2018). Yet it remains to be seen how this role will be facilitated in relation to the role of the SENCO.

To enable SENCOs to develop and enact their priorities, support is needed. Prior to the pandemic, during the implementation of the SEND reforms, SENCOs perceived themselves as being ‘strategically alone’ in trying to implement changes at pace to maximise the effectiveness of provision for pupils with SEND (Curran, 2019). The survey suggests that these feelings were amplified to a degree during this period. SENCOs were clear that they expected more support from local and national government during the pandemic than they received, which is a concern that was echoed by other school-based professionals in relation to vulnerable pupils (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Conversely, the majority of SENCOs were satisfied with the internal support received from their senior leadership teams or from the central teams if they were part of a MAT.

Alongside receiving support, the survey suggests that SENCOs were actively seeking to provide support to colleagues during the pandemic, despite the barriers in doing so. In the past, there have been concerns about the SENCO role not being sufficiently valued by other staff (Burton & Goodman, 2011), but the pastoral and entrepreneurial nature of the SENCO role is something that teachers may have benefited from during the pandemic as they shared similar experiences. A reflexive analysis of school-based professionals' narratives was undertaken in the early stages of the pandemic and six themes were identified: uncertainty, finding a way, worry for the vulnerable, importance of relationships, teacher identity and reflections (Kim & Asbury, 2020). With the possible exception of teacher identity, these themes arguably reflect the day-to-day reality of the SENCO role pre-pandemic, suggesting that SENCOs were well placed to support the wider workforce, although this did not consistently happen in practice due to workload.

Fundamentally for SENCOs to be effective in the role, they should have sufficient time (Curran et al, 2018) and should not have an excessive teaching load (Purdy & Boddison, 2018, p330). During the peak of the pandemic the survey findings suggested that SENCOs were required to undertake additional teaching or SLT duties, in response to needs in school at that time. This echoes the findings from Middleton and Kay which suggested that SENCOs may have 'stepped into the breach to fulfil roles needed within the school owing to contextual challenges' (2021, p. 220). Although it not a new phenomenon. Pre pandemic, SENCOs reported that they are routinely pulled away from SEND focused activities to meet the wider needs of the school (Curran et al., 2018). The potential impact of limited time suggests that the good practice developed during the initial stages of the pandemic, including increased contact with families, may be hard to sustain if adequate time is not allocated to the role.

However, despite the aforementioned challenges, the survey findings indicate that SENCOs have sought to respond to the challenges of the pandemic in a characteristically entrepreneurial

manner (Curran, 2019). The nature of entrepreneurialism in this context is such that it can produce innovative practice, which can result in a revised set of expectations of SENCOs. Hellowell (2019) is clear that when the SENCO role is redefined, the ethical implications need to be carefully considered. In the context of the pandemic, it is arguably SENCOs themselves who have been leading on the reconstruction of their own roles. The fundamental values-base of SENCOs means that ethical considerations will be at the heart of the decisions they make. Ultimately, ethical leaders are authentic leaders (Carpenter, 2018, p72) and this is reflected in the leadership that SENCOs have demonstrated during the pandemic.

Conclusion

There are two broad conclusions that can be drawn from this study.

1. The amplification of pre-existing strengths and challenges

This study has shown how the pandemic has amplified some the strengths and challenges that SENCOs had already been experiencing for many years. These challenges echo the themes from previous studies, including growing concerns about mental health and wellbeing (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014), the importance of effective relationships with families (Mansaray, 2006) and the nuances of effective differentiation (Lewis & Norwich, 2005, p5). The concept of inclusive pedagogy has long been problematic (Norwich, 2013, p79) but the added complexities of the pandemic and the post-pandemic educational landscape will certainly demand further research. The findings of this study are predominantly about the amplification of pre-existing, rather than new, strengths and challenges. These findings are in harmony with Kim and Asbury (2020) who conclude that the amplification effect of the pandemic has uncovered issues that were always there, but previously hidden in plain sight. More generally, the amplification and uncovering of issues echoes the findings of other studies, which suggest that the pandemic has ‘exposed and perpetuated’ existing inequality (Crane et al, 2020).

2. The need to prioritise mental health and wellbeing in schools

Townsend (2020) is clear about the mental health challenges facing children in our school system and is unforgiving about the way in which children have been impacted during the pandemic. For pupils with SEND, these challenges are arguably more acute, particularly if they have complex or medical needs. Equally the pressures that have been placed on school-based staff during the pandemic and the impact this may have had on their mental health and wellbeing. Prior to the pandemic, there had already been calls for the use of professional or reflective supervision in schools (Lawrence, 2020) and the findings of this study suggest that SENCOs should be a priority for receiving such support now more than ever before.

Limitations

In considering the limitations of the study, there is minimal generalisability of the findings beyond mainstream settings due to the relatively low number of respondents in comparison to the population. Similarly, the pandemic continued for several months after the survey was conducted, so it is possible that the attitudes and opinions of SENCOs could have developed further during this period. Lastly, the survey provided anonymity to respondents with the aim of encouraging them to be honest about their experiences. However, this made it difficult to include a follow-up phase, such as focus groups, to qualify and provide further context to the emerging findings from the survey. This limitation was partially mitigated by allowing free text responses to provide further detail about the answers to some questions and through the open coding analysis of these responses.

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Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is available upon reasonable request.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was granted by Bath Spa University Research Support Office and the approval number is 1759.

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