BERA

Exclusion & the strategic leadership role of special educational needs co-ordinators in England

Planning for Covid-19 & future crises

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ABOUT THE SMALL GRANTS FUND

The research presented in this report was funded by BERA's Small Grants Fund (SGF), which was set up in 2020 to support research projects that investigate the impact that Covid-19 had, and continues to have, on important aspects of education and educational research. BERA initially commissioned a total of 15 projects that examined issues of socioeconomic disadvantage, support for teachers and schools, early years, special educational needs and online learning, each of which has produced a final report that shares their findings and recommendations for practice, policy and future research endeavours.

Because of the SGF's success in its first year, BERA intends to commission research projects through the SGF on an annual basis, each year addressing a different, pressing theme. Our intention is that these projects will:

- make important contributions to the discipline by contributing to and leading current debates
- develop research capacity by involving postgraduate students and early career researchers
- receive applications from and involving practitioners and policymakers as well as academic researchers.

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Summary

Statutory guidance requires special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) in England to provide strategic leadership to ensure a school ethos of inclusivity (DfE, 2015). The Covid-19 crisis has underlined the need for 'advocacy' leadership (Clarke & Done, 2021), as children with such needs are already disproportionately represented in school exclusion data, and increased levels of exclusion post-lockdown – including 'off-rolling', the unacceptable and in some cases unlawful practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without using a permanent exclusion (Owen, 2019) – are anticipated (Daniels et al., 2020). Findings from this BERA-funded research project indicate that some SENCOs are routinely prevented from exercising such leadership – for example, when they are omitted from their school's senior leadership team (SLT) – suggesting that SENCO input to schools' future crisis planning is an area that requires clarification.

Our research objective was to determine levels of involvement in SLT decision-making and planning for offsite and onsite provision for 'vulnerable' children during Covid-19 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 south-west of England, where the proportion of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is relatively high. A concurrent national quantitative online survey provided contextual data.

1. Introduction

Current statutory guidance requires SENCOs to strategically lead change to ensure an inclusive school ethos and provision for all children according to need. However, not all SENCOs are included in SLTs and their capacity to influence decision-making may be limited. Anecdotal reports suggested that pandemic conditions were exacerbating exclusionary pressures and had led to SENCO preoccupation with managerial and administrative duties. Our study sought to generate evidence on whether and how SENCOs participated in Covid-19-induced school planning for lockdown, provision for vulnerable pupils and full school reopening, and to explore SENCOs' experience around exclusionary pressures during this time. Analysis of unexplained exits from school (Hutchinson & Crenna-Jennings, 2019), and our own research investigating senior school leaders' understanding of off-rolling (Done & Knowler, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021), reinforced concerns that schools inclined to off-roll prior to the Covid-19 lockdown may exploit circumstances of closure and emergency provision for vulnerable pupils. For example, parents who under normal conditions would be reluctant to home educate might be more easily persuaded that home education is a more suitable option for a child with SEND.

2. Literature review

The literature indicates that many SENCOs strive to fulfil their role despite onerous workloads and lack of resources (Clarke & Done, 2021) and that SENCOs' capacity to influence senior leader decision-making around exclusion can be limited (Done et al., 2021). Statutory guidance dictates a strategic SENCO remit that includes ensuring an inclusive whole-school ethos and inclusive practices, thus positioning SENCOs as exercising advocacy leadership (Anderson & Cohen, 2015). This guidance assumes that SENCOs are in SLTs or will influence SLT decision-making, thereby addressing exclusionary and discriminatory practices. Daniels et al. (2020), however, have identified a risk of higher levels of exclusion of vulnerable pupils during and following pandemic conditions, and there is growing evidence that some schools routinely exclude or off-roll pupils (Done et al., 2021). Levels of awareness of what constitutes off-rolling varies among senior school leaders (Done & Knowler, 2021). Only a small proportion of vulnerable pupils entitled to attend school during lockdown did so (Eivers et al., 2020), and the Disability Children's Partnership (2020) reported that 30 per cent of parents were advised that their child was ineligible to attend school following risk assessments undertaken by schools. Emergency legislation entitled 270,000 children in England with education, health and care (EHC) plans to continue attending school; however, parents were advised to home educate due to school staff shortages (Children's Commissioner, 2020). The risk faced by the million children classified as having SEN, of increased levels of exclusion and off-rolling during and post-lockdown, was not acknowledged. Under non-Covid-19 conditions, research suggests that schools may off-roll in order to avoid the time-consuming bureaucratic demands of the EHC plans system (Done et al., 2021). In a 'new normal' context (Done & Knowler, 2020c), advice on what constitutes off-rolling or an exclusionary practice gives way to the legitimisation of the home schooling of vulnerable pupils as integral to school policy and planning. Attention is now focused on the attainment gap, online provision and inequitable access to laptops in the pupil population (Montecute & Cullinane, 2021).

3. Research design

Our key research questions were as follows.

- How have SENCOs been involved in planning for offsite and onsite provision for vulnerable children during Covid-19 lockdown conditions?
- How are SENCOs involved in SLT decision-making about post-Covid-19 provision?
- How are SENCOs working to prevent exclusion and off-rolling during Covid-19 lockdown conditions?

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected in a mixed methods research strategy.

It should be noted that only one national lockdown (from March 2020) in England was initially envisaged. However, further school closures (November 2020 and from January 2021) over the project timeframe continued to impact SENCOs' work. Consequently, recruiting SENCOs for the study was more difficult than anticipated.

The research team was aware of the personal and professional challenges school staff were experiencing due to involvement in the National Award for SEN Coordination (NASENCO) during autumn 2020. The unique context of schools in March 2021, combined with the sensitivity of exclusions as a research topic, resulted in extremely small sample sizes. Nevertheless, insights into SENCOs' work at this time can inform research directions and offer further opportunities for reflections on research design – something the researchers were already considering in relation to research on exclusion more generally (Done & Knowler, 2021).

Data collection included an online quantitative survey of SENCOs nationally. The questionnaire generated demographic data (for example on role, SLT status and type/size of setting) and Likert scale (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 480) responses intended to capture SENCOs' reflections on their experiences as the first lockdown progressed. The planned closing date in October 2020 was extended to February 2021 due to a poor response (n=31) despite repeated distribution of the survey link by, for example, the National Association for Special Educational Needs and local SENCO forums. Plans to collect qualitative data via regional focus groups were revised as prospective participants preferred interviews on ethical grounds. Sampling was purposive and opportunistic, involving approaches to SENCO networks in the southwest of England; eight semi-structured interviews of 45 to 60 minutes duration were conducted with SENCOs from varied settings and with varying levels of experience (see table 3.1) via the online platform Zoom (November 2020 to February 2021). Recordings were transcribed using Word Online.

The University of Plymouth's Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business research ethics and integrity committee granted ethics approval.

Data was managed using NVivo software to assist thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As noted, data analysis was complicated by repeated lockdowns during the data collection period.
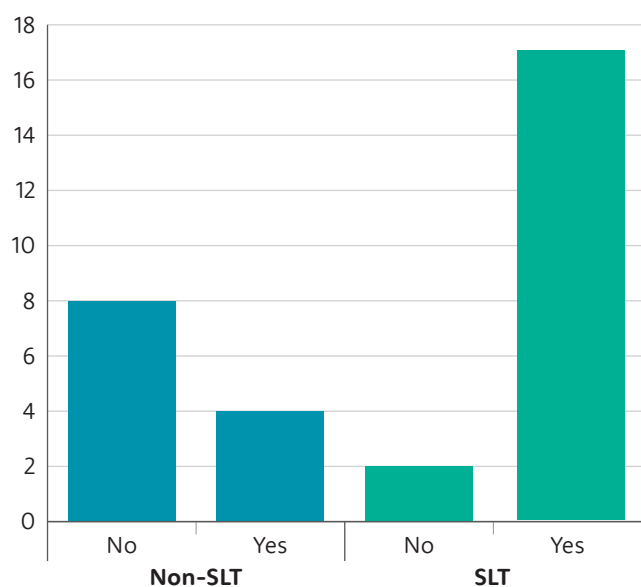
Table 3.1
Qualitative sample composition

Role		Setting		Senior leadership		SENCO experience	
Headteacher	1	Mainstream secondary	4	SLT	4	Under 5 years	2
Deputy headteacher	1	Mainstream primary	3	Non-SLT	4	Over 5 years	6
Teacher	6	Post-16 independent	1				

4. Findings & results

Survey and interview data indicate variation in how SENCOs worked within their settings during the first lockdown. For example, in survey data, more respondents reported involvement in planning and decision-making than non-SLT colleagues; 19 respondents stated they were SLT but not all of these reported involvement in general planning prior to lockdown (figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1

Responses to the questions, 'Are you a member of SLT as SENCO, and were you involved in general planning for teaching and learning provision prior to lockdown?'

Positive responses from the same participants on their strategic involvement before lockdown (16 of 21) suggest that strategic dialogue diminished in the days leading up to school closures.

Figure 4.2

Responses to the statement, 'Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic I had discussed crisis planning in my school with senior leaders (i.e. before January 2020)'
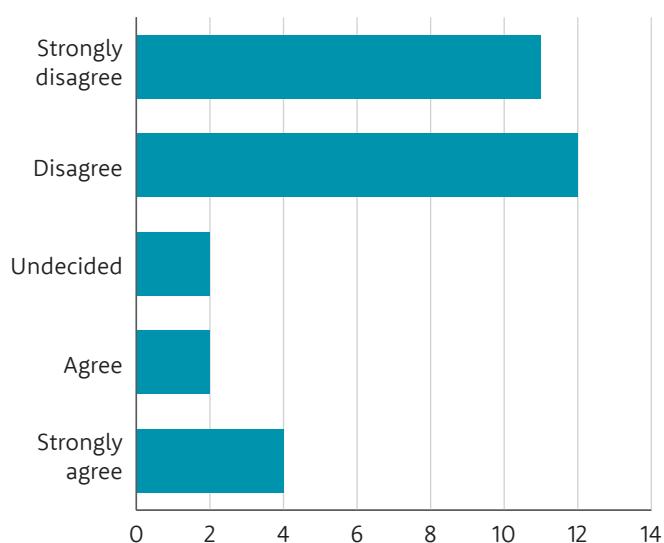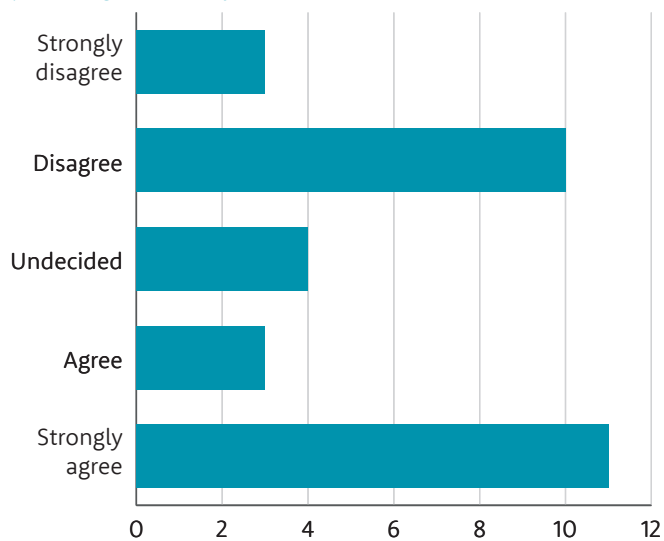

Figure 4.3

Responses to the statement, 'I was fully consulted by senior leaders about SEND provision and crisis planning in the days before lockdown'

4.1 PRE-LOCKDOWN

Six of 31 survey respondents reported involvement in some planning for crises prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and 23 reported no such involvement (figure 4.2). No evidence was found in the interview data of crisis planning in schools prior to the pandemic, regardless of SLT membership or with particular reference to pupils with SEND.

As shown in figure 4.3, only 11 respondents strongly agreed that they were consulted by senior leaders immediately prior to the first lockdown; 17 were either undecided or disagreed, implying no guaranteed linkage between SLT membership and consultation.

By contrast, interview responses revealed no understanding of what crisis planning might entail other than immediate responses to the specific event of Covid-19-induced school closure. Non-SLT SENCOs were not involved in planning for offsite provision or partial reopening provision for vulnerable pupils. Immediate responses to school closure were perceived as disorganised or chaotic due to inadequate government notice 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 shown in figures 4.4 and 4.5 on local authority (LA) support prior to lockdown indicate that the majority of respondents noted disagreement or were undecided such that, in addition to finding their own school contexts challenging, SENCOs were not being supported in onsite or offsite learning, in contrast to pre-pandemic times.

Figure 4.4

Responses to the statement, 'I was supported by the LA (or equivalent) to plan for pupils with SEND learning *onsite* prior to lockdown'
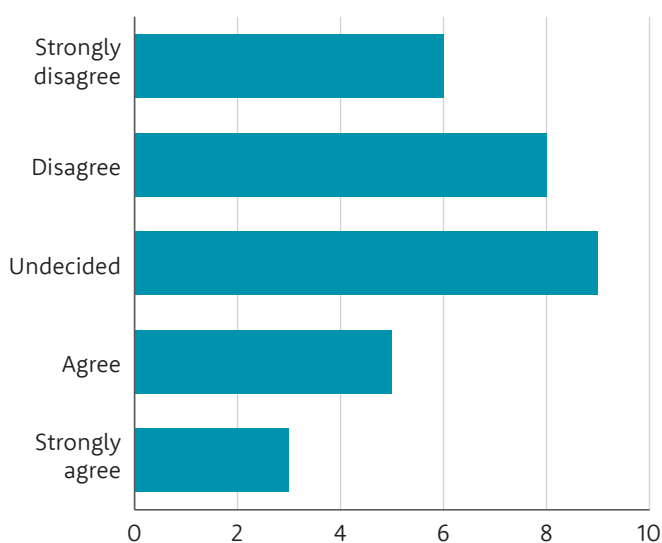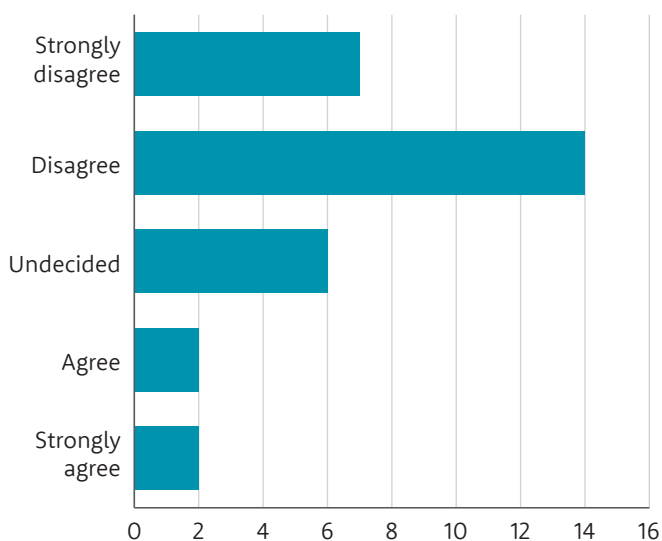

Figure 4.5

Responses to the statement, 'I was supported by the LA (or equivalent) to plan for pupils with SEND learning *offsite* prior to lockdown'

4.2 DURING LOCKDOWN

Differences between how SENCOs were working prior to and during lockdown were evidenced in survey responses. Figures 4.6 and 4.7 show a difference between responses prior to and during lockdown relating to the extent of consultation about vulnerable pupils. While levels of agreement remained the same, more respondents strongly agreed with this statement during lockdown (see figure 4.7), possibly reflecting further conversations and national media coverage around what constituted 'vulnerable' for schooling purposes at this time.

Figure 4.6

Responses to the statement, 'I was fully consulted about provision for vulnerable pupils in planning *prior to* lockdown'
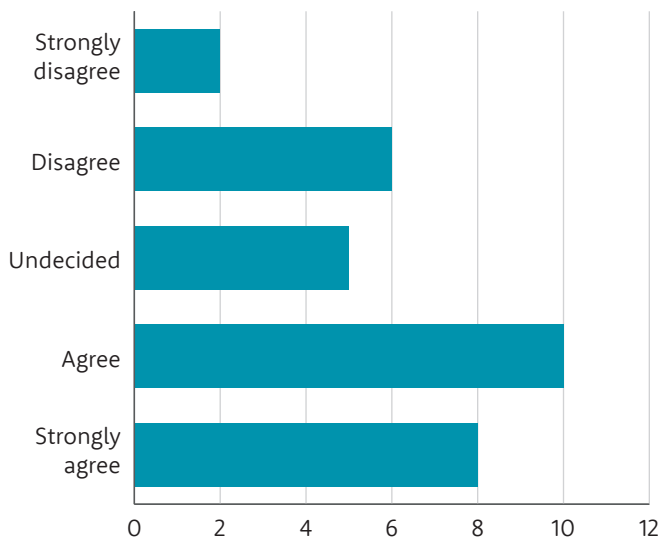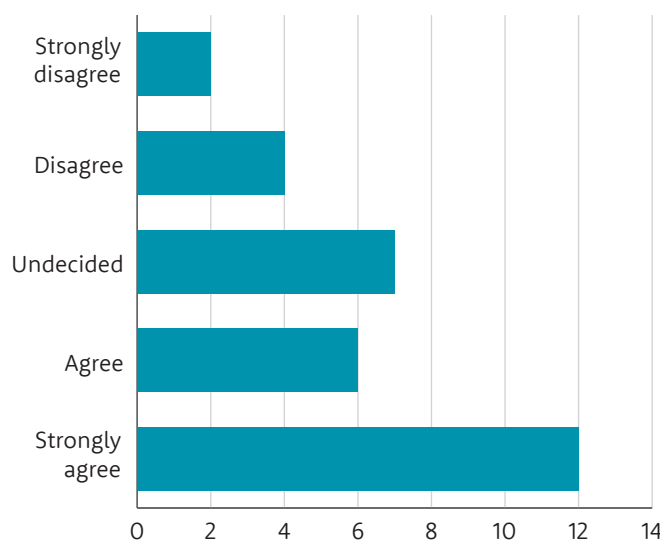
Figure 4.7
Responses to the statement, 'I was fully consulted about provision for vulnerable pupils *during* lockdown'

Response	Value
Strongly disagree	2
Disagree	4
Undecided	7
Agree	6
Strongly agree	12

Figure 4.8
Responses to the statement, 'Pupils with SEND were prioritised in the planning for learning during lockdown'

Response	Value
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	6
Undecided	4
Agree	12
Strongly agree	8

Interview responses 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 of just dropping off some Chromebooks that we knew some children would really need.'*
>
> Mainstream secondary / non-SLT

While survey respondents generally agreed that pupils with SEND were prioritised (figure 4.8), seven disagreed – perhaps unsurprisingly given the identified variation in approaches and planning prior to lockdown.

Additionally, figures 4.9 and 4.10 show that some respondents believed that onsite and offsite provision for pupils with SEND was reduced during the lockdown period, introducing a tension between the reported prioritisation of SEND pupils' learning (figure 4.8) and a perception of reduced provision during lockdown.

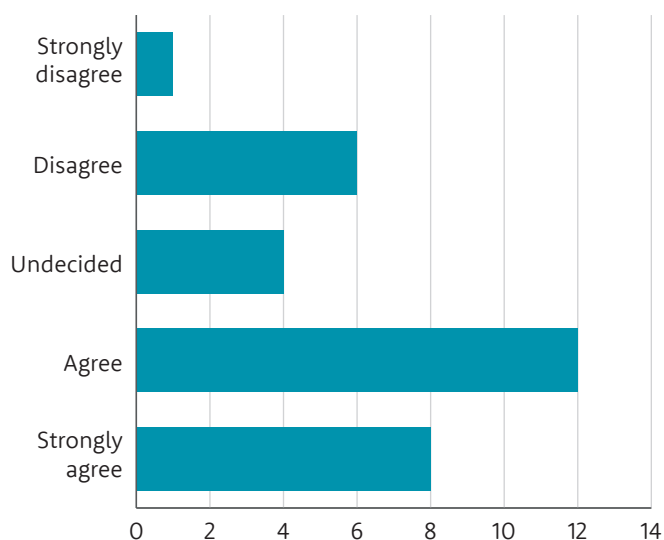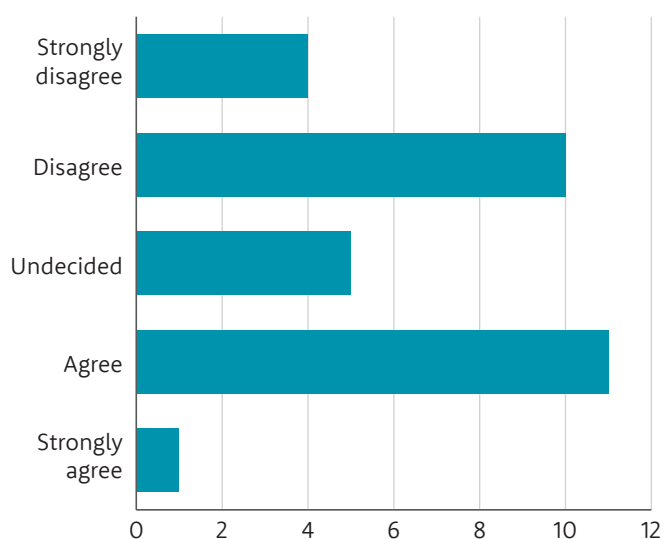**Figure 4.9**
Responses to the statement, 'Plans made for *offsite* support have led to reduced provision for pupils with SEND during lockdown'

| Response	Value
Strongly disagree	4
Disagree	10
Undecided	5
Agree	11
Strongly agree	1

At interview, inexperienced non-SLT SENCOs identified positive outcomes of lockdown, highlighting the limitations of non-SLT membership.

> *'Historically, we've never operated in that way [SENCO in SLT], 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 lockdown.'*
>
> Non-SLT

Figure 4.10
Responses to the statement, 'Plans made for *onsite* support have led to reduced provision for pupils with SEND during lockdown'

Response	Value
Strongly disagree	4
Disagree	8
Undecided	4
Agree	14
Strongly agree	1
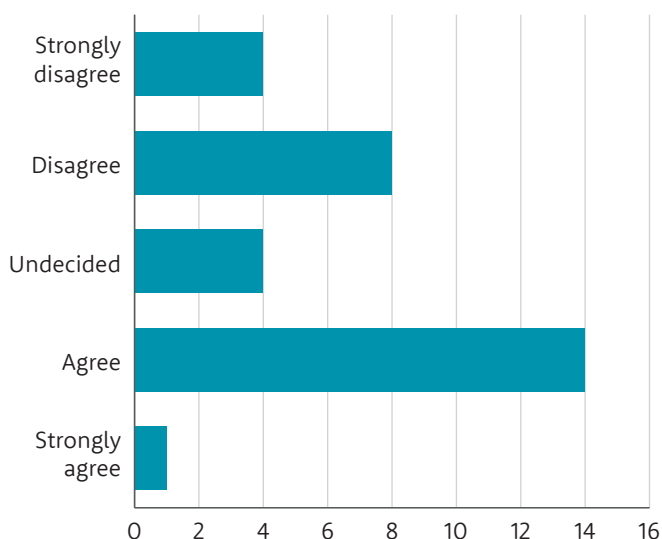
A minority identified improved relationships with parents as a positive outcome.

4.3 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 six 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 be the 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, overall, 24 respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that there were negative impacts that would ultimately affect such relationships (figure 4.11). This is clearly an aspect warranting more in-depth exploration, including during the third lockdown (from January 2021), as the cumulative impact of repeated school closures was outside the project remit.
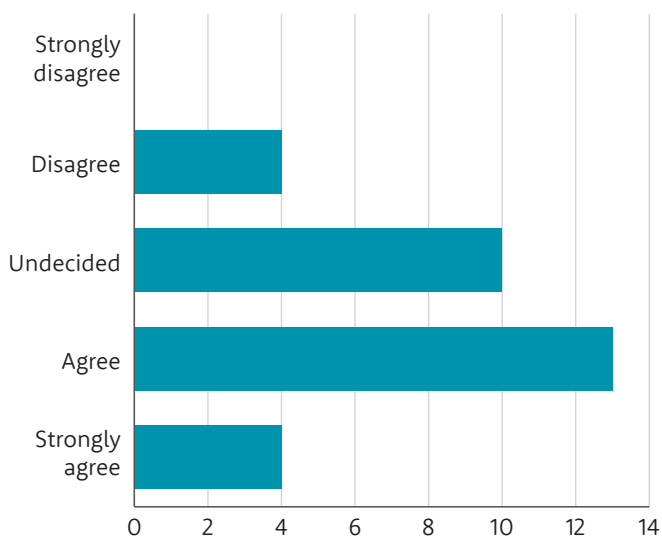
Figure 4.11
Responses to the statement, 'My relationship with parents of pupils with SEND has been negatively impacted by the change in provision due to the Covid-19 pandemic'

Response	Value
Strongly disagree	9
Disagree	15
Undecided	4
Agree	3
Strongly agree	0
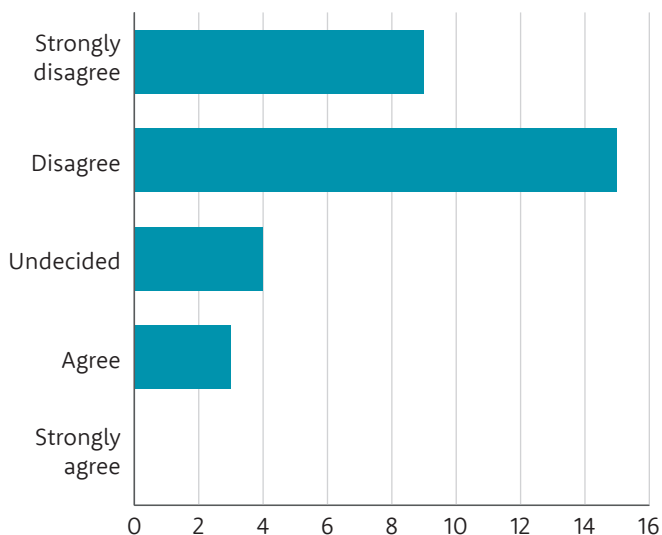
There was some agreement around the ways that this lockdown experience would impact future provision, with respondents feeling it would be improved (figure 4.12). Again, this warrants further exploration as it is reasonable to assume that, as SENCOs became accustomed to new ways of working, they would feel more positive.

**Figure 4.12**
Responses to the statement, 'Provision in my setting post-lockdown will be improved due to planning made during lockdown'

Response	Value
Strongly disagree	0
Disagree	4
Undecided	10
Agree	13
Strongly agree	4

There was some intensity of feeling around whether SENCOs might advise parents to continue home schooling once lockdown restrictions ended (figure 4.13); 25 of 31 respondents stated they would not advise parents to home school. While no further questions were asked on this particular issue, this may reflect research literature that shows that educators can have negative perceptions of parents' abilities to support their child with SEND at home (Goodall, 2021).

Figure 4.13
Responses to the statement, 'I will advise some parents to continue home schooling of pupils with SEND while Covid-19 restrictions apply in my school'
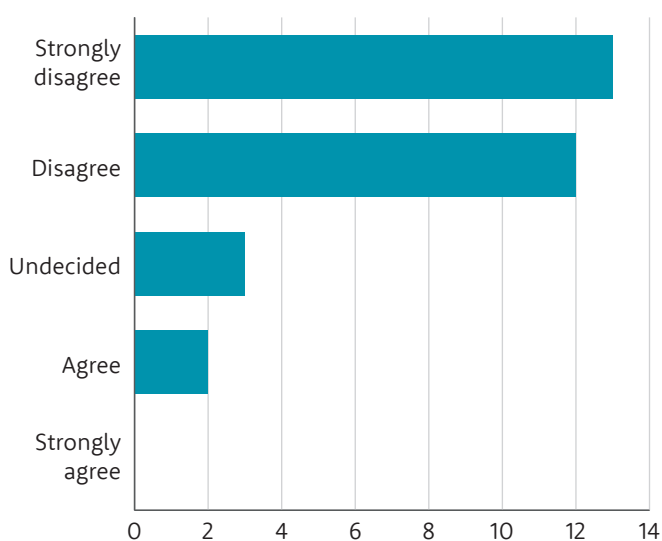
4.4 STRATEGIC PLANNING

At interview, only one participant exemplified the proactively strategic SENCO role demanded in statutory guidance, by referring to the 'vision' of reduced exclusion rates that they had outlined when interviewed for the post some months prior to lockdown. This SLT SENCO was actively involved by the school's headteacher in planning for partial reopening provision, including the creation of a safe space for children with SEND. 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 headteacher) exemplified the SENCO role of in-house expert, enshrined in historical statutory guidance.

'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 and I might as well use it to support children who really just need some additional support.'

Mainstream primary / SLT

Whole-school initiatives were understood as organising provision for all pupils (online); only one participant explicitly referred to pupils with SEND as a priority in this context.

4.5 EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICES

At interview, only two participants reported formal exclusions during lockdown. This lack of knowledge around exclusions was mirrored in survey data: respondents reported having seen no evidence of exclusionary practices in their settings – in this case permanent exclusion (figure 4.14). When asked about exclusion, all disagreed or strongly disagreed that pupils with SEND had been excluded during lockdown (figure 4.15). This may be due to zero exclusion policies in these settings, but it is more likely to reflect the high number of primary school respondents – there is generally less fixed-term and permanent exclusion reported in this sector (DfE, 2020). However, requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 made by No More Exclusions (in press) shows that school exclusions have continued during the lockdown period, with 13,286 exclusions recorded between September 2019 and November 2020.

Figure 4.14
Responses to the statement, 'I know that children with SEND have received a fixed-term exclusion during lockdown'
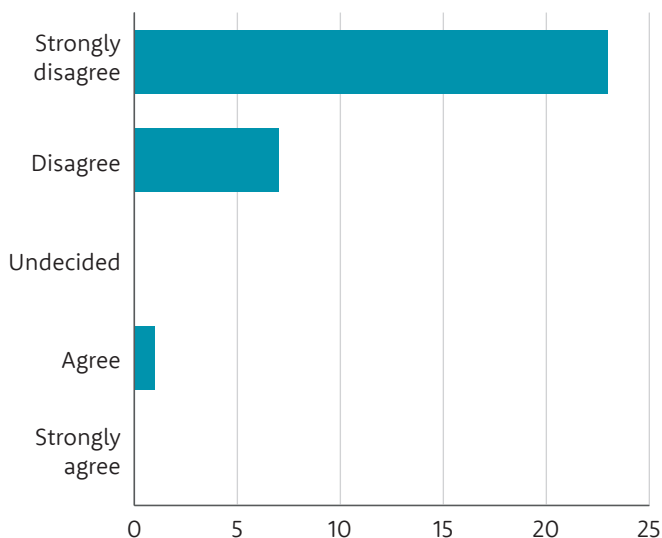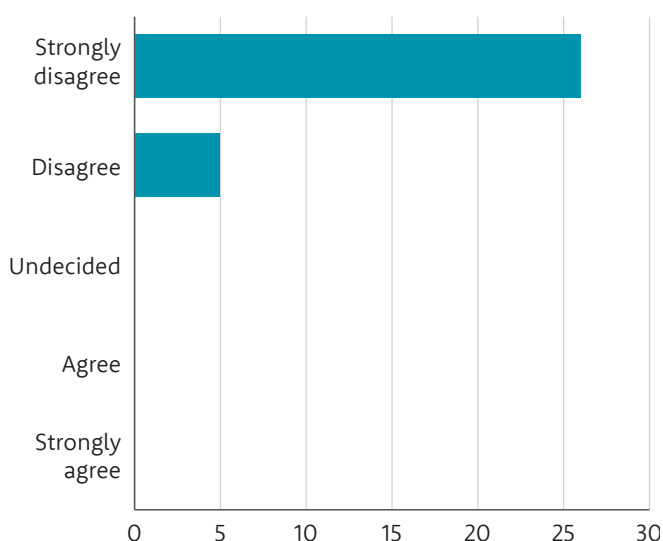
Figure 4.15
Responses to the statement, 'I know that children with SEND have been permanently excluded during lockdown'

At interview, understanding of what constitutes off-rolling varied; two SENCOs (non-SLT / SLT) had not encountered the term and claimed to be unaware of such practices. In the survey data, no respondents reported knowing about or seeing off-rolling happen (figure 4.16).

Figure 4.16
Responses to the statement, 'I know that children with SEND have been 'off rolled' or informally excluded during lockdown'
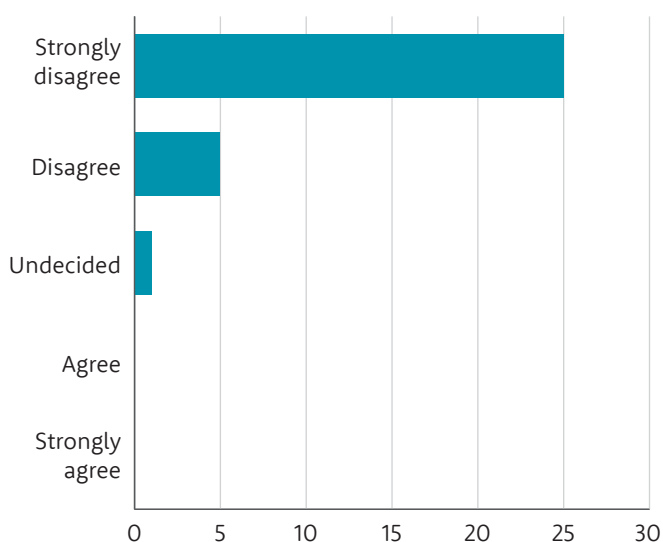
Some interviewees offered comments on schools other than their own, and only one raised performativity pressures contributing to such exclusion.

'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 headteacher / 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.'

Secondary teacher / non-SLT

'There are some schools... who 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

One 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 effective and therefore they are off-rolled.'

Mainstream secondary / SLT

Among interviewees, alternative provision was not viewed as exclusionary; part-time timetabling is one practice used to avoid immediate exclusion.

'Not in my school. We would look at finding alternative placements for them and working with 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.

'Looked at all of 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

The survey responses shown in figures 4.17, 4.18 and 4.19 indicate minimal concern around exclusion for pupils with SEND, looked-after children or those receiving free school meals.

Figure 4.17
Responses to the statement, 'I am concerned that my school will permanently exclude more children with SEND following reopening'
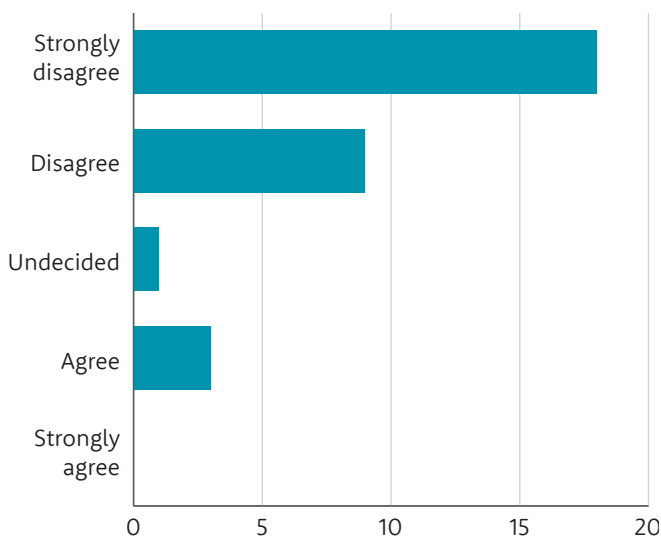

Figure 4.18
Responses to the statement, 'I am concerned that my school will permanently exclude more looked-after children following reopening'
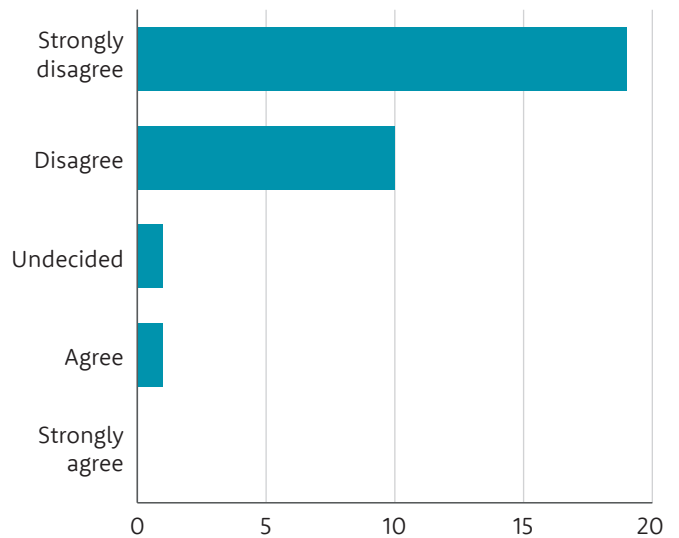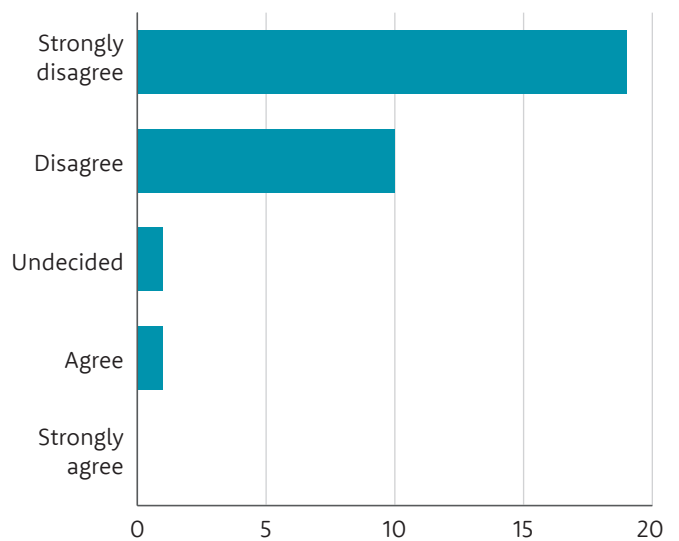

Figure 4.19
Responses to the statement, 'I am concerned that my school will permanently exclude children with free school meals following the lockdown partial closures'

5. International comparisons

While our research findings suggest that strategic planning was not a key feature of SENCOs' work during the first national lockdown, it can be noted that educational provision has been approached very differently in international contexts. Further research is needed to explore the extent to which SEND provision globally has been impacted by lockdowns and pandemic measures. The lack of planning ahead of the Covid-19 crisis exemplified by responses in this small-scale study is likely to reflect a wider lack of preparation by schools across England.

In contrast, following the SARS outbreak in 2003, Singapore adopted proactive measures such as e-learning and home learning weeks, to allow for flexibility of provision should another outbreak occur (Government of Singapore, 2020). Reports from professional networks suggest that this translated into less time out of school for pupils and less disruption generally. In Dubai, a 'flexi schooling' approach that had 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 schools have more resources. However, they demonstrate that working in crises in education contexts is not a universally novel phenomenon and precedents exist which could have been explored.

6. Recommendations & conclusions

6.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

Policymakers should consider:

- mandatory SLT membership for all SENCOs
- legislation requiring SENCOs to undertake crisis planning for SEND pupils (reflected in statutory guidance and NASENCO syllabi)
- government-funded sabbaticals for SENCOs permitting study related to leadership and strategic planning.

Practitioners must consider:

- the integration of safeguarding practices and disciplinary frameworks.

6.2 CONCLUSION

No evidence was found of strategic planning prior to Covid-19-induced school closures, in contrast to countries in which earlier pandemics have resulted in plans that can be rapidly operationalised. Consequently, Covid-19 has both highlighted and exacerbated familiar issues related to SEND provision in English schools, including an apparent reluctance of an as yet unknown proportion of SENCOs to challenge exclusionary practices and weaknesses around strategic practice (Done et al., 2021). The post-pandemic period provides an opportunity to radically review educational priorities, including obvious tensions between routine exclusionary practices and the right to education. The experiences of SENCOs (or their equivalents) internationally could be illuminating and facilitate discussion around crisis and strategic planning that mitigates the need for reactive firefighting, however laudable the efforts of school staff during the period immediately preceding and following the school closures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

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