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Advocacy leadership and the de-professionalising of the Special Educational Needs

Coordinator role

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Abstract

The UK government is proposing to replace M-level National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination (NASENCO) training, mandated for SENCOs (SEN Coordinators) in England, with an unaccredited NPQ (National Professional Qualification). Such downgrading their level of qualification is intended to significantly increase the number of qualified SENCOs, however, this is likely to reduce SENCOs' capacity to exercise 'advocacy leadership' in support of students at risk of marginalisation and social exclusion. We reject a neoliberal political discourse of continual improvement that neglects the need for critical literacy and research-informed inclusive practice on the part of SENCOs, and suggest that endemic exclusionary practices in English schools are more likely to go unchallenged. The move towards non-accredited SENCO status risks their de-professionalisation, and this proposal is linked to an academisation agenda and efforts to normalise a trichotomised education system (comprising mainstream, 'special' and 'alternative' provision) by presenting such changes as an improvement.

Introduction

This paper describes an important proposed change that concerns the training of Special Educational Needs Coordinators SENCOs in England. The change is critically analysed with reference to an associated policy discourse and from a poststructuralist perspective. In methodological terms, this entails the ‘problematization’ (Bacchi, 2012) of political rhetoric around SENCO training and drawing attention to the wider socio-political processes at play. The proposed change is outlined below, followed by consideration of contextual trends (such as academisation, exclusionary pressures and discourses of ‘excellence’) and the implications for SENCO practice, including, more specifically, their capacity to engage in research-informed leadership and attend to matters of social justice.

Whereas the current accredited training for SENCOs highlights the importance of the development of critical literacy and research literacy (British Educational Research Association [BERA] 2014), its planned replacement is an unaccredited National Professional Qualification (NPQ) that abandons the existing M-level assessment criteria. It is contestable whether, under such circumstances, SENCOs will be equipped to offer research-based challenges to existing school policies and practices that marginalise or exclude children and young people with disabilities and learning difficulties, and those otherwise at risk. This is not to suggest that addressing present challenges at organisational level will translate into systemic transformation. Accredited SENCOs remain enmeshed in policy landscapes, and organisational structures and cultures, where they navigate discriminatory and/or exclusionary school practices in a variety of ways and with varying degrees of effectiveness (Done et al. 2021). Nevertheless, our experience of M-level training for SENCOs suggests that they are more likely to be aware of concepts such as intersectionality (Thomas & Loxley 2022, p.3), i.e. the interplay of multiple ascribed identities and attendant risk of stigmatisation, marginalisation and exclusion; examples of such interplay can be found in the

Timpson Review (DfE 2019) of school exclusion. The type of leadership that we envisage – ‘advocacy leadership’ (Clarke & Done 2021), assumes awareness of such complexity and critical literacy can facilitate initiatives around inclusive practice that go beyond organising support in response to diagnosed conditions. Additionally, M-level research skills enable inclusion-related research at school level that can carry more weight in an education culture where evidence-based practice is valorised (as in Done, Murphy & Bedford 2016).

Anecdotally, the proposed NPQ could involve centrally provided standardised teaching materials and school principals signing off research projects that reinforce school priorities rather than problematising exclusionary practices through rigorous investigation; both speak to wider concerns around the loss of professional autonomy and a neoliberal technicisation of caring (Ball 2003).

The changes proposed in a recent government green paper (Department for Education [DfE] 2022a; Booth 2022) can be contextualised within a broader movement towards the de-professionalisation of teaching. This trend serves to deflect attention from questions related to the purpose of education (Biesta 2015) and to the valuing or, rather, the (de)valuing of inclusion as a socio-political aspiration, appropriate school-based practices and a school ethos. Ball (2020, p. xiv) summarises de-professionalisation as comprising the de-politicisation and technicisation of the teaching role associated with neoliberalising processes and a discourse of continual improvement, or what Grimaldi (2020) dubs the ‘tyranny of improvement’. Currently, SENCOs striving to ensure a more inclusive school ethos do so against a backdrop of tension between political discourses of raising academic standards and inclusion in a quasi-marketised education system where academic performance data matters (Done 2020; Done & Knowler 2020a, 2020b).

The proposed replacement of the NASENCO with a NPQ evokes a neoliberal politics of speed and logic of acceleration (Thoma 2022). The research skills that the NASENCO

aims to teach take time to acquire, as does an engendering of the deep reflection that is testimony to an ethical sensibility. The less exacting NPQ will take less time and may therefore appeal to, as yet, untrained or prospective SENCOs who are aware that SENCOs are routinely described as having onerous workloads (Clarke & Done 2021; Richards 2022). In terms of evaluative practice, the green paper (DfE 2022a) appears to draw on published studies such as the National SENCO Workforce Survey (Curran, Boddison & Moloney 2020; Curran, Moloney, Heavey & Boddison 2018, 2020) that have documented an increasing proportion of SENCOs concerned about excessive workload and administrative duties. The proposed ‘solution’ is a move to online assessments for Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans and a recommendation that SENCOs are allowed sufficient time to fulfil their role (DfE 2022a, p.44); yet, no such time is to be mandated and how this will be ensured is not specified. As Daniels, Porter and Thompson (2022) state, evidence ‘can only be evaluated in context’, which includes attention to policy agendas. Despite the identified ‘problem’ of over-identification of ‘special’ educational needs in earlier policy statements (DfE 2011), more recently, the emphasis in guidance related to Early Years Education (EYE) (DfE 2014) has stressed the importance of early identification of learning difficulties and disabilities. The green paper notes that ‘early years SENCOs are not subject to a minimum statutory requirement regarding the level of qualification’ and that many struggle with accurate identification (DfE 2022a, p.39). The ensuing stated objective is to substantially increase the number of qualified SENCOs in EYE settings through the introduction of a new (and unaccredited) Leadership NPQ (DfE 2022a, p.14, 44).

This dilution of the SENCO qualification is held to bring SENCO training into alignment with the government’s ‘wider teacher development reforms’ (p.44). It ignores evidence around the benefits of master’s level study (Schleicher 2011) and risks the critical engagement with policy related to inclusive education that is a feature of many existing

NASENCO courses. The green paper or SEND review (DfE, 2022a) can thus be characterised as reinforcing the ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011) upon which neoliberal educational cultures are premised; ethical reflexes are side-lined in the discursive commitment to both ‘continual improvement’ and speedily achieved solutions to identified problems (Ball 2003; Varela & Solomon 2022).

Currently, all schools in England are required to have a qualified teacher who is also a SENCo (DfE 2015) and, within three years of their appointment, SENCos must undergo mandatory accreditation, acquiring the NASENCO through study at Level 7 (Masters) level. The learning outcomes of NASENCO programmes were outlined by the National College for Teaching and Learning which stated that ‘it would be difficult to achieve the aims of the Award at a lower level’ (NCTL 2014, 3). The SENCo’s remit has been described as dichotomised (Kay et al. 2022). It is not only managerial and administrative; SENCos are also charged with providing strategic direction at school level (DfE 2015) and university-based NASENCO programmes are designed to ensure that they possess the requisite research skills to fulfil this strategic role. The government’s (DfE 2022a) proposed replacement of the NASENCO with a NPQ will deprive teachers wishing to pursue further Master’s level study of transferrable credits where the provider is not partnered with a university, raising the issue of parity and an ambiguity around the status of qualifications. The political rationale for this shift, and its implications for teachers and the inclusion agenda, are explored here. The proposal specifically related to SENCos is contained within a much broader range of proposed changes that are positioned as enhancing provision and outcomes for children and young people with disabilities or learning difficulties who require additional support, and the context and import of some of these proposed changes are also considered below.

Tensions

Efforts to address the marked variation in SEND provision between schools and local authorities across England are laudable. However, other government policy objectives appear to be designed to protect an education system and culture that has been characterised as ‘regular schooling’ (Power & Taylor 2020) through the normalisation of exclusionary practices (Done & Knowler 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b; Done, Knowler & Armstrong 2021; Daniels, Porter & Thompson 2022). Thomas and Loxley (2022), for example, cite Wood’s (2021) documenting of routinised school practices through which nominally included children on the autistic spectrum can be marginalised in mainstream settings.

The key argument presented in this paper is that the government has correctly identified and foregrounded problematic aspects of current provision. However, many of the proposed ‘solutions’ should be read as the wrong changes at the right time, including, the endorsement of an integrated trichotomised (mainstream, special and alternative provision) education system and the failure to mandate SENCo membership of schools’ Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs). The isolation of narrowly defined issues and presentation of targeted ‘solutions’ works to obscure the tensions between the rationalities that inform policy in the area of inclusion (Done & Knowler 2020b). An economic rationality is acknowledged in the statement that current levels of provision are economically unsustainable:

The government commissioned the SEND Review in September 2019 as a response to the widespread recognition that the system was failing to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people, that parental and provider confidence was in decline, and, that despite substantial additional investment, the system had become financially unsustainable (DfE 2022a, p.9).

Notably, the excerpt above also illustrates how the neoliberal discourse of continual improvement relies on an expansion or decompression of time and a collective forgetting in

order to constitute both ‘problems’ and their proposed solutions as novel. Historically, an earlier green paper entitled ‘Support and Aspiration’ (DfE 2011), had also opened with an acknowledgement that the then current system of SEN/D provision was failing its intended recipients and proving to be economically unsustainable. Recurrent (re)inventions of the ‘problem’ as novel serve a political purpose since ‘solutions’ are more likely to be understood as topical and necessary according to a distinctly neoliberal managerialist logic of amelioration and a political discourse around required ameliorative measures.

More recently, a political rationality is articulated through a socio-politically incontestable discourse around social and educational inclusion that is recast or, more accurately, explicitly aligned with a policy discourse around ‘excellence’:

Excellent mainstream provision serves as the foundation for a strong SEND system that delivers for all children and young people and allows them to have their needs met effectively in their local setting (DfE 2022a, p.41).

Such provision is conflated with ‘excellent teaching’ (p.41) and ‘excellent teacher training’ (p.14), evoking a familiar hegemonic political discourse around academic standards that confines matters of inclusion to a series of relatively modest policy initiatives that, nevertheless, profoundly affect the lives of those in need of support and the professionalism of those whose remit is to provide that support. No fundamental shift in political priorities is evidenced in the green paper, and teachers and SENCOs continue to be responsabilised for the quality of SEND provision (Done 2020; Done, Murphy & Knowler 2015). This is despite, for example, research indicating that the capacity of SENCOs to influence a school’s strategic vision can be conditioned by the school principal’s positionality and the extent to which they are committed to a vision of inclusive practice and supportive of SENCO initiatives (Done & Knowler 2021c). This finding resonates with Frostensen’s (2015) argument, based on the

Swedish context, that professional autonomy is ‘conditioned at the local level’ due to ‘the strong mandate of school managers and principal educational organisers to organise professional work’.

However, Frostensen’s (2015) suggestion that ‘macro level de-professionalisation’ does not necessarily mean ‘micro-level practice de-professionalisation’ and the loss of professional autonomy following de-centralisation is questionable in an English context. An academisation programme, which promised greater autonomy to schools in England, has been accompanied by centralising tendencies (Wilkins, 2020) that continue to be evidenced; for instance, in the proposed introduction of a national performance monitoring framework for providers of alternative provision (AP) in the Schools Bill (UK Government 2022). Typically, MATs (multi-academy trusts) are market-orientated and SENCos are likely to find ‘advocacy leadership’ (Anderson & Cohen 2015; Clarke & Done, 2021) harder to initiate and sustain. The creation of referral units or AP units within MATs serves to protect a ‘regular schooling’ culture in which improving academic performance data is a priority; hence, Power and Taylor (2020) identify such cultures with the proliferation of practices that separate students with additional needs from their peers, particularly in contexts where formal exclusion, which disproportionately affects students with SEN/D (Education Policy Institute [EPI] 2021), is prohibited. The professional interests of SENCos within such a culture may inhibit advocacy for specific groups of students (such as those with ‘special’ needs or from areas of high social deprivation). While some argue that the incorporation of ‘special’ schools within a MAT should be construed as enhancing inclusive practice, the suggestion that MATS can attract and utilise private funding (Lane et al. 2022, p.73) raises question around equitable distribution of resources between schools with and without Trust status.

These types of situation are evocative of a paradox of ‘good intentions’ (Popkewitz 2020, p.14) whereby, for example, SENCos are simultaneously committed to promoting the

interests of students with SEN/D, yet obliged to defend their head teacher's exclusionary actions in legal proceedings brought by parents (Done, Knowler, Warnes & Pickett-Jones 2021). In such settings, SENCo's may also be implicated in a school's exaggeration of the severity of behavioural issues which then serves as a pretext for informal or formal exclusionary actions (YouGov 2019). Those who do advocate or contest such practices require a high level of critical literacy, a capacity to develop and promote an alternative school vision, and the research skills and confidence to influence SLT thinking. In Frostensen's (2015) terms, they must be equipped to forge an autonomy of an 'individual character'. This was evidenced in research into SENCo's involvement in crisis planning prior to COVID-induced school closures with partial re-opening for students classified as 'vulnerable' in 2020 (Done & Knowler 2021a, 2021b). An incoming and qualified SENCo had researched comparative exclusion rates and sought the support of the appointing school principal in seeking to address a relatively high exclusion rate. The same SENCo was also aware that students at risk of sensory or emotional overload should have a suitable space to withdraw to when needed, and ensured that such a space was created within the school for those attending during partial re-opening (Done & Knowler 2021a, 2021b).

In contrast, the vision conveyed in the green paper (DfE 2022a) effectively reinforces the prevailing education culture and legitimises practices that can be considered as exclusionary, and which disproportionately affect students with additional needs. The failure to address such inequities is demonstrated in a government announcement concerning student absenteeism and the fining of parents (Jeffreys 2022), even though the Children's Commissioner (2022) reports that this may be due to schools failing to meet needs associated with SEN/D or mental health issues. Far from challenging inequitable and exclusionary pressures and practices, the green paper implies that SENCo's will be involved in organising support in the event of 'internal exclusion, suspension, permanent exclusion, a managed

move, or implementation of a part-time timetable’ (DfE 2022a, p.7). Rather than advocating to minimise such practices, SENCos are charged with explaining to children the reasoning behind school decisions and their separation from peers (p.15).

Academisation

The recent proposals outlined in the pre-legislative consultation process initiated by the current Conservative government (DfE 2022a) promote an intensification of a flagship policy of academisation first introduced by a New Labour government (1997-2010). At the time of writing, several clauses in an associated Schools Bill (UK Parliament 2022) had very recently been withdrawn, or were scheduled to be modified, following opposition from both Conservative and crossbench politicians (Adams 2022). The bill is notable for many reasons. Firstly, it reinforces a tendency towards centralised control of education despite policy rhetoric promising greater autonomy for academised schools. Secondly, it is invoked in support of the proposals contained in the green paper entitled ‘SEND review: Right support, right place, right time’ (DfE 2022a) which claims to advance the inclusion agenda in England, despite consolidating aspects of that agenda that have been repeatedly criticised as counterproductive or undermining of inclusive values and practice. One such aspect is academy control of admission policies that has been linked to higher levels of permanent exclusion (Heilbronn 2016, p.313) and a relatively higher decrease in the proportion of students with SEN/D (Black, Bessudnov & Norwich 2019). Thirdly, it confirms the prioritising of an overarching political agenda of improving academic ‘standards’ and the secondary status of inclusion as a political objective (Done 2020) as illustrated by the proposed removal of accredited status to training for SENCos in England with the risk of de-professionalisation of this role. Fourthly, it exemplifies the appropriation of a critical discourse and its reworking as political rhetoric and use in the service of a broader political movement. Fifthly, it demonstrates the continuing neglect of exclusionary practices in

schools that undermine an inclusion agenda, and highlights the role that the SENCo could play in challenging such practices.

The green paper (DfE 2022a) appropriates the research-informed argument that the current SEND provision system is failing many young people and their families (e.g. Ainscow 2021) and presents it as the rationale for policy change whilst failing to address many of the issues identified as hindering SENCos in fulfilling their remit. These include failing to mandate a senior school leadership team (SLT) role for SENCos and, instead, arguing that a new unaccredited NPQ will create the conditions for later SLT membership (DfE 2022a). Recent research into the SENCo role and exclusionary school practices during the Covid-19 pandemic underlined both the importance of SLT membership and of university-based training (Done & Knowler 2021a, 2021b). The latter is designed to equip SENCos to develop a strategic vision for their school and, where needed, to present research-informed challenges to practices that inhibit the realisation of that vision. There is a risk, otherwise, that SENCos' priorities may reflect a school culture that owes more to the school's mode of governance and positioning within a quasi-marketised education system than to an inclusion agenda.

The Schools Bill (UK Parliament 2022) requires all state-maintained schools to join multi-academy trusts (MATs) by 2030 and the original version of the bill afforded an unprecedented level of control to the Department for Education including, for example, powers to veto the appointment of school trustees and to intervene in a MAT's admission criteria, spending and course content (Adams 2022). Such powers contradict the longstanding discursive framing of academisation as permitting schools greater autonomy (DfE 2010). Wilkins (2020) follows Karlsen (2000, p.525) in conceptualising this distinctively neoliberal structure of education governance as 'decentralised centralism', and also Rayner, Courtney and Gunter (2018) in arguing that academisation compromised local democratic

representation on school governing bodies. Academised schools reporting directly to central government required governing bodies with the professional skills demanded in an intensified performance-based accountability culture (Wilkins 2020, p.100) and ‘more highly skilled’ boards were positioned as providing ‘more strategic oversight’ (DfE 2016, p.50). At its inception, and subsequently, academisation has been integral to a highly politicised ‘tyranny of improvement’, that is, a political and professional discourse of continual improvement associated with marketisation and performance-based accountability practices (Grimaldi 2020). The Schools Bill (UK Parliament 2022) simply ignores available evidence that, overall, MATs fall short of expectations regarding inclusive education (Black, Bessudnov & Norwich 2019) and, instead, discursively constitutes MATs as benefitting ‘all children’ by virtue of a capacity for ‘sharing expertise and resources to improve outcomes’ (DfE 2022a, p.15).

Subsumption

A summary of the ‘SEND review’ (DfE 2022b) states that it aligns with wider reforms, including those outlined in the aforementioned schools bill (UK Parliament 2022), to deliver improvements in SEN/D provision. Whilst the political ‘standards’ and inclusion agendas can be conceptualised as existing in a state of tension (Done 2020; Done & Knowler 2020a), the key trope of striving for excellence in the green paper implies that inclusion must be subsumed within this wider political agenda if it is to be achieved. The prioritisation of an academic ‘standards’ agenda requires schools to deliver improved academic performance data while striving to fulfil an inclusion agenda that the government itself has deemed to be financially unsustainable in its current form (DfE 2022a, p.9).

Attention to cost-efficiency has been an enduring feature of inclusion-related international and national policy discourse since the 1990s (Done, Murphy & Knowler 2015); and here, ‘delivering better value programmes’ (DfE 2022b) and cost-efficiency in the drive

for ‘improvement’ (Grimaldi 2020) serves as a pretext for central government intervention in ‘local SEND systems’. The green paper purportedly responds to socio-cultural expectations related to inclusion while failing to acknowledge the potentially conflicting demands placed on mainstream or ‘regular’ schools (Done & Knowler 2020a, 2020b). Accordingly, it marks a profound shift in the political rhetoric around inclusion, formalising the prioritisation of ‘standards’ by presenting inclusion as integral to the drive towards academic excellence. The green paper counters criticisms of a dichotomised education system (mainstream / ‘special’) by presenting a trichotomised system (mainstream / ‘special’/ alternative provision) in which existing legal, but exclusionary, structures and practices are framed as providing reassurance to parents and schools that the most appropriate setting for particular groups of children will be available (DfE 2022a).

The green paper is subtitled, ‘Government consultation on the SEND and alternative provision system in England’ (DfE 2022a), suggesting that these hitherto distinct systems are synonymous and thus dispensing with aspirations to full inclusion promoted by the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1984). Instead of facilitating the inclusivity of regular or mainstream schools, the government seeks to integrate an improved alternative provision (AP) into a single education system discursively constituted as offering multiple pathways (DfE 2022a, p.1; DfE 2022c). Currently, 82.7% of the children and young people in AP and segregated from their mainstream peers for variable durations have identified ‘special’ educational needs (DfE 2022a, p.7), reinforcing arguments that the AP system exists to protect a hegemonic and normative notion of what mainstream schooling does and who it is for (Done & Knowler 2022). Disproportionality in AP attendance, as with exclusionary school practices, cannot be satisfactorily addressed through rhetorical invocations of ‘excellence’. The political influencing of research agendas can deflect attention from this issue. Thomas and Mills (2022, *in press*) describe being consistently steered away from

sociological explanations of such issues and directed towards ‘behaviour’ when undertaking DfE commissioned research into AP. While the relationship between ‘social, emotional and mental health’ (SEMH), specific SEN/D and ‘behaviour’ is now widely acknowledged as a ‘wicked problem’ (Armstrong 2018) in the context of hegemonic discourses around schooling and legal or illegal exclusionary practices, this narrow focus makes the training of teachers in mainstream settings a logical ameliorative strategy. Hence, the green paper promises ‘excellent mainstream provision’ and, as argued earlier, conflates such provision with ‘excellent teaching’ (DfE 2022a, p.41) and ‘excellent teacher training’ (p.14). Currently, experienced and accredited SENCoS are able to identify training needs within their settings and assess whether these have enhanced inclusive practice; and, of course, advocacy leadership presumes attention to those whose interests are to be protected on ethical grounds. The latter includes a refusal to reduce children to ‘behaviour’ and a recognition of how their disability or learning difficulty may manifest in school environments (Done, Knowler, Warnes & Pickett-Jones 2021), and be complicated by intersectional contexts (Thomas & Loxley 2022) .

Exclusion

It can be strongly argued that the ‘problems’ with SENCo performance identified in the green paper, which function as rationales for downgrading the level of SENCo qualification, should have been addressed in very different ways such as mandating SLT membership for SENCoS. The Education Policy Institute notes the same geographic variability in SENCo performance and SEN/D support cited in the green paper (DfE 2022a) and insists that specialist training for school leaders and the targeting of ‘in-career’ teachers ‘progressing to or already in leadership positions’ would ‘maximise the reach of any specialist training’ (EPI 2021, p.90). This suggestion is linked to concerns about exclusionary practices in schools that have ‘very different perceptions of what needs can be met in mainstream settings’

(Hutchinson & Crenna-Jennings 2019 cited in EPI 2021, p.90), with some reflecting what Thomas and Loxley (2022, p.2) describe as ‘atavistic’ conceptions of difference and ability. The off rolling ‘at scale’ of children with additional needs is held to be one consequence of a failure to exhaust all means of including and supporting such children (EPI 2021, p.90). A strengthening of the SENCO’s role in challenging conceptions of difference and what constitutes an exclusionary practice seems infinitely preferable to the measures proposed in the green paper such as further academisation (DfE 2022a), which risk exacerbating exclusionary pressures (Heilbronn 2016), greater social stratification (Wilson 2011) or less diverse school populations (Norwich & Black 2015). The proposed acceleration of the academisation process is purportedly intended to raise the quality of provision and, yet, sponsored academies were found to ‘use various formal and informal mechanisms to not admit, exclude or move on pupils at SEN Support level’ (Black, Bessudnov & Norwich 2019, p.12).

As Daniels, Porter and Thompson (2022, p.2) state, policy can impact the quality of evidence, despite governments claiming to draw on a wide range of evidence in support of policy proposals. The ‘regime of veridiction’ (Foucault 2008, p.35), or ‘set of rules enabling one to establish which statements in a given discourse can be described as true or false’, varies according to government policy objectives. In relation to illegal school exclusions (‘off rolling’), for example, ‘hard’ statistical evidence is not available (Done 2022, *in press*). Statistics on permanent exclusions which indicate they are rare events (DfE 2019) tend to be cited, thereby missing the point. Such events are subsumed within a hegemonic discourse through being presented in policy as mere details that must be addressed if progress or continual improvement is to be sustained. We would argue, however, that SENCOs with research skills who are critically literate have the capacity to question political rhetoric and policy discourse should they be inclined to do so, and many are given their intrinsic motivation (Kay et al. 2022). With SLT membership and further training around exclusionary

practices, they are well-positioned to address issues around exclusionary practices within their schools.

Currently, some SENCOs are negotiating school cultures in which improved academic performance is prioritised while other SENCOs find themselves in schools – often in areas of high socio-economic deprivation, with disproportionate numbers of students with SEN/D due to market forces and the exclusionary practices of schools locally (Ball 2018; Exley & Ball 2013). Both scenarios highlight the need for SENCOs equipped to advocate effectively for students that are at risk of exclusion and / or not receiving the support to which they are legally entitled (Clarke & Done 2021). The national school inspectorate (Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted] 2019) has acknowledged that an excessive emphasis on examination performance has incentivised schools to remove students through both legal and illegal exclusionary practices. Refusal of admission may also account for the under-representation of young people with disabilities and learning difficulties within academies nationally (Ofsted 2019). The green paper (DfE 2022a) and schools bill (UK Parliament 2022) are likely to reinforce, not counter, such trends.

Conclusions

Statutory guidance requires SENCOs to play a pivotal role in the implementation of inclusion-related policy and SENCOs are individually responsabilised for ensuring suitable provision and an inclusive ethos at school level regardless of the wider socio-political and economic context (Done 2020). The evaluation of SENCO performance has, therefore, been complicated by awareness of systemic issues such as lack of funding and marked geographical variations in provision for children and young people with disabilities and / or ‘special’ educational needs (DfE 2022a). Research suggests that the capacity of SENCOs to drive improvement at school level is conditioned by numerous factors such as the existing school culture, resourcing and the degree of support from or membership of senior leadership

teams (Done & Knowler 2021a, 2021b). However, the present university-based postgraduate training of SENCoS is designed to equip them to engage in research-based and strategic ‘advocacy leadership’ (Anderson & Cohen 2015; Clarke & Done 2021) regardless of their status.

It has been contended that such advocacy, which implies possession of the confidence and necessary information with which to challenge SLT decision-making, could play a critical role in preventing the exclusionary practices that disproportionately affect students with SEN/D (Done & Knowler 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b; EPI 2021). This suggestion is equally complex since some of the practices concerned are both legal and routine in the English education system (Ofsted 2019). Exclusionary school practices are pertinent to debates around SENCo qualification since they highlight a discursive site that can be characterised as one of political and professional ambivalence. It can be argued that older discourses associated with a meritocratic selective education system are being re-invigorated and generalised to the whole school population; and that both legal and illegal exclusionary practices function to preserve a culture and discourse of ‘regular schooling’ (Power & Taylor 2020). The latter means that students perceived as non-contributors in the drive for academic ‘excellence’ risk being removed from classes or, indeed, from school. Ironically, this ‘drive’ is not reflected in the recent proposal to deprive SENCoS of an accredited training qualification (DfE 2022a); instead, a non-accredited qualification is purportedly sufficient to address a failing system of SEN/D provision.

Our primary objective in this paper has been to challenge the proposed abandoning of accredited M-level university based or approved training for SENCoS in England and to consider the implications for the ‘advocacy leadership’ (Clarke & Done 2021) that SENCoS must exercise if discriminatory and exclusionary practices are to be reduced or eliminated. These practices affect the most disadvantaged students (Done & Knowler 2020a, 2020b).

Nevertheless, the concept of inclusive education has been reified and is ostensibly evidenced through the national ratification of international conventions, national legislation protecting individual rights, statutory guidance for schools and education professionals, the production of data related to the participation rates of specific demographic groups in mainstream education settings, and so forth. All serve to create the sense of a socio-political reality that inclusive education is now firmly established, even if areas for amelioration continue to be identified. The political and professional imperative to continually evidence improvement occurs within a distinctive epistemological and political space of ‘veridiction’ (Foucault 2008), accompanied by and contributing to a technicisation of the teaching role (Ball 2003, 2020). A political reification of ‘progress’ is achieved through reiterations of policy objectives within political discourse, supported by an empiricist tradition (Grimaldi 2020) that presupposes ‘progress’ can be measured or numerised (Ball 2020). Hence, the extent and significance of endemic exclusionary practices in schools in England is downplayed lest a political and policy rhetoric in which inclusive education is assumed to have been achieved is undermined.

The ‘new cultures of professionalism, managerialism and leadership’ associated with marketisation and academisation (Wilkins 2020, p.100) are being mobilised in support of a political rhetoric around academic ‘standards’ (p.100). Meanwhile, SENCOs that, under current government proposals (DfE 2022a, 2022b), achieve only an unaccredited qualification are less likely to be equipped to challenge governmental priorities and those of schools that privilege ‘standards’ over inclusion (Middleton 2022).

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