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SEND: Are school-aged young people with dyslexia getting a fair deal in schools?

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Abstract

Background: Any dialogue regarding the education of school-aged young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) needs to consider educational policy, school provision, and the effectiveness of the school system in promoting inclusive practice. Research suggests children with SEND, such as dyslexia, may be disadvantaged because of the challenges involved in accessing equitable provisions in mainstream schools.

Methods: This paper draws on data from a doctoral study capturing school staff's views on SEND policies and the promotion of dyslexia inclusion in mainstream schools. It employs an 'insider and outsider' methodology to analyse the feedback of 11 school staff and senior leaders from two mainstream secondary schools in England.

Findings: Findings suggest negative perceptions of SEND provisions amongst school staff and leaders, due to staff workload and lack of training, leading to gaps in the understanding of quality first teaching (QFT) and inclusion. The finding also suggests that the needs of school-age young people with dyslexia are often deprioritised, compared to learners with other SEND needs.

Implications: To ensure that young people with SEND get a fair deal in schools, school staff must be empowered to deliver inclusive learning, with adequate planning time and training to support this.

Keywords: Insider Research, Outsider Research, SEND, Dyslexia, UK Schools.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the provision for young people with dyslexia in schools in England and its impact on their inclusion. It offers three perspectives: interview transcripts of school staff, an outsider's view of a social care worker, and, lastly, an insider's view from an experienced school SENDCO (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator). These insider/outsider perspectives are interesting, as both have dyslexia and have experienced English schools as children.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a developmental disorder or difficulty that affects many literacy-based skills: reading, writing, spelling, and phonological awareness, along with other areas of difficulty: short-term memory, balance, and coordination. The Delphi definition of dyslexia by Carroll & Holden et al., (2025) described it as,

- ◆ A set of processing difficulties that affect the acquisition of reading and spelling.
- ◆ In dyslexia, some or all aspects of literacy attainment are weak in relation to age, standard teaching and instruction, and level of other attainments.
- ◆ Across languages and age groups, difficulties in reading fluency and spelling are key markers of dyslexia.
- ◆ Dyslexic difficulties exist on a continuum and can be experienced to various degrees of severity.
- ◆ The nature and developmental trajectory of dyslexia depend on multiple genetic and environmental influences.
- ◆ Dyslexia can affect the acquisition of other skills, such as mathematics, reading comprehension, or learning another language.
- ◆ The most commonly observed cognitive impairment in dyslexia is a difficulty in phonological processing (i.e. in phonological awareness, phonological processing speed or phonological memory). However, phonological difficulties do not fully explain the observed variability. Working memory, processing speed and orthographic skills can contribute to the impact of dyslexia.

This definition provides a comprehensive explanation of how dyslexia is likely to impact an individual across the lifespan. There is also a recognition that reading and spelling fluency, as well as accuracy, are core to dyslexia difficulties. The focus on fluency rather

than accuracy makes the definition more applicable to diverse age groups who may not be showing difficulty with accurate reading but still struggle with fluency (Carroll & Holden et al., 2025). This definition is particularly important because dyslexia has been a subject of debate for many years. Critics of dyslexia tend to focus on reading difficulties similar to those of other groups who struggle with reading (Elliot & Grigorenko, 2024), thereby discounting the other features of dyslexia, including memory retention and processing speed.

In school, dyslexia affects many of the skills valued in learning (Armstrong & Squires, 2015). Lack of early identification and targeted support can result in secondary challenges for the individual affected, including school-related anxiety, task-avoidant behaviour, learned helplessness, and truancy (Alexander Passe, 2015, 2023). Research has also shown that self-harm and suicide can result from a lack of or delayed support and diagnosis (Alexander-Passe, 2015). The implications of having dyslexia amid inadequate school support can include negative school experiences that can lead to exclusion for the young person due to negative coping strategies stemming from disillusionment and learned helplessness (Nnamani, 2024; Lithari, 2019).

The English government's Educational White Paper, *Opportunity for All* (Department for Education (DFE), 2022), stated its ambition for all children to have a bright future and succeed in school, regardless of ability. Provisions for children and young people with special educational needs like dyslexia are detailed in the SEND Code of Practice 0-25years (DFE, 2015). However, a systematic literature review into the factors affecting the learning experiences of children and young people with dyslexia suggest that despite the UK's SEND reforms introduced in 2014, access to equitable education is a challenge for children and young people with dyslexia, partly because of factors such as lack of funding, bureaucracy and even teachers' lack of understanding of dyslexia and other SEND (Nnamani, 2024). This is supported by other commentators (Leitão & Dzidic et al., 2017; Tickle, 2017; Woodcock & Hitches, 2017; Cheyney-Collante & Gonslaves et al., 2021; Done & Knowler et al., 2021). These studies evidence the challenges of providing equitable education for all.

SEND IN SCHOOLS

SEND Provision and Legislative Framework

Research on the provision for children and young people in England with dyslexia must refer to the guidelines in the Children and Families Act (DFE, 2014), as dyslexia is included in its definition of SEND. The term 'Special Educational Needs and Disabilities' (SEND) was introduced by the Children & Families Act (DFE, 2014) to describe individuals with a learning difficulty and/or a disability that calls for special health and education support to be made to them. Before 2014, the term 'Special Educational Needs' (SEN) was used in England's educational legislation, excluding those with disabilities.

Whilst the change to SEND was made in 2014, the Department for Education still uses SEN instead of SEND for some provisions, e.g. SEN Notional Budget (Education & Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), 2024). This creates confusion in an already complex area.

SEND was introduced to integrate better or encompass the needs of children with physical and other disabilities, which may not necessarily affect their learning but may affect other areas of their lives, including schooling. (Norwich, 2017). This also reflects the 'Health' part of 'Educational, Health, and Care Plans (EHCP), which was introduced to secure additional support for children and young people with complex SEND needs, noted in The SEND Code of Practice (CoP) (DFE, 2015).) providing guidelines for professionals and institutions working with children and young people aged 0-25 years.

Amongst many of the provisions set out in the CoP is a graduated provision for young people with SEND, which ensures that young children with SEND receive tiered intervention where necessary to help them thrive, including the universal, targeted, and specialist, see Figure 1, explained as:

- ◆ Universal (also known as Wave 1): Good practice for all, basic inclusion for all delivered by class teachers in a classroom setting.
- ◆ Targeted (also known as Wave 2): When more help is needed, small group interventions are often used to support additional needs, often outside of the classroom with a teaching assistant.
- ◆ Specialist (also known as Wave 3): When specialist or expert help is required, external professionals may provide it, e.g., educational psychologists or speech, language, and communication therapists, as seen in Figure 1.

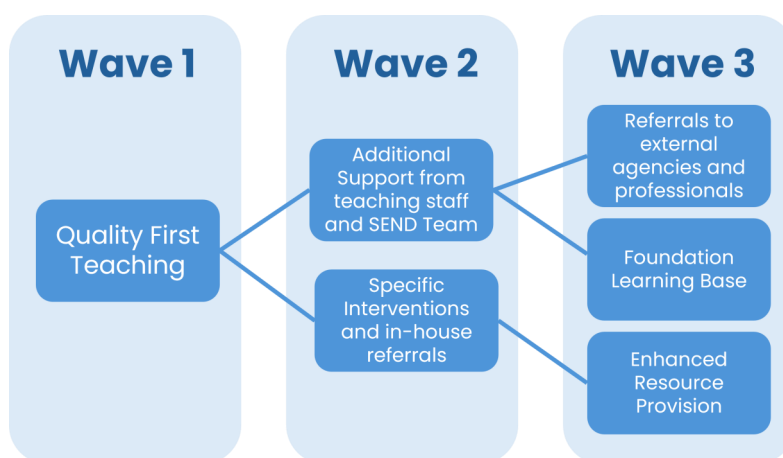


Figure 1: Graduated approach to SEND (Market Weighton School, 2026)



Figure 2: The 'assess plan do review' continuous cycle.

Schools are also expected to 'Assess, Plan, Do, Review,' as a continuous cycle to record SEND provision for Tiers 2 and 3 (targeted and specialist) and assess its effectiveness (DfE, 2015), see Figure 2.

- ♦ **Assess:** The class teacher or subject teacher (working with the SENDCO) is responsible for conducting a clear analysis of a pupil's needs, drawing on teacher assessments and experience of the pupil.
- ♦ **Plan:** Where it is decided to provide a pupil with SEND Support, the parents should be notified. All teachers and support staff who collaborate with a pupil should be made aware of the pupil's needs, the outcomes sought, the support provided, and any required teaching strategies.
- ♦ **Do:** The planned interventions should then be put into place. The class or subject teacher should work closely with any teaching assistants or specialist staff involved, and the SENDCO should support the class or subject teacher.
- ♦ **Review:** Reviews should take place and inform feedback into the analysis of the child's needs. The Code of Practice suggests schools should meet with parents three times a year, so termly. Any decision to involve specialists can be taken at any time and should always involve parents.

To allow for effective school-level provision and specialist provisions, schools are allocated:

- ♦ General Annual Grant (GAG) or tier 1 funding, based on the National Funding Formula (NFF), which is based on a variety of factors, such as the number of pupils a school has and how its location may affect the school's running costs (ESFA, 2024).

- ◆ Tier 2 or top-up funding is based on other factors such as the number of young people with English as an additional language (EAL) and the socio-economic profile of the school's local catchment area (DFE, 2024). This is commonly called the 'SEN notional budget,' but being notional, it is not ring-fenced, and headteachers can choose to use this money for non-SEND items such as teacher salaries and the upkeep of school buildings. Additionally, because no assessment of SEND needs is included in the notional budget calculation, the school can decide who will or will not receive SEND provision (National Audit Office (NAO), 2019). This may hurt many young people with certain types of SENDS who are not prioritised for support (Warnes & Done, et al., 2021; Done & Knowler et al., 2021).

Although schools can apply for a 'top-up' funding for students with high (complex) needs, there is a clear expectation in the SEND CoP that schools are liable for the first £6000 of SEND support for each student before they can apply for additional funding (DFE, 2015; NAO, 2019). In reality, not all students with SEND will gain £6000 worth of support, and it is down to the school to decide how much to spend (DFE, 2015; NAO, 2019). However, because the majority of this SEND notional budget is spent covering the first £6000 for each EHCP, there may be little or none left for students without EHCPs, which can result in less provision for other SEND students, such as those with dyslexia. Secondary mental health and behavioural manifestations can arise from this, e.g. a young person with dyslexia may not get the support they need in class, which can lead to self-doubt, anxiety, depression, anger, avoidant behaviour, and learned helplessness (Alexander-Passe, 2017; 2023). This can result in schools responding to secondary manifestations of mental health and behavioural needs rather than their primary learning difficulties, thereby treating the manifestation rather than the cause. Some children and young people may be excluded due to secondary manifestations, e.g., verbal or physical expressions of anger and frustration.

According to GOV.UK (2022/23), behavioural issues are among the most common reasons for school exclusion in England. The Timpson Review of School Exclusion (Crown, 2019) suggest that a disproportionate number of children excluded from school have SEND. Young people with dyslexia who do not receive adequate support in school may be among those excluded for displaying behaviours that communicate unmet needs. The lack of understanding of dyslexia's impact on individuals can also exacerbate the challenges they face in school and hinder a young person's ability to thrive (Nnamani & Lorma, 2024).

There is, however, a recognition at a policy level that, despite the unprecedented investment in the SEND system, many school-aged young people with SEND, like dyslexia, still struggle to access school support (DFE, 2022). The SEND Review: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time (DFE, 2022) proposed an inclusive system that provides timely access to specialist services and support for all children with SEND. This was also reflected in the

SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan (DFE, 2023), which emphasised early identification and evidence-based targeted support. However, the challenges in providing support for school-aged young people with SEND persist (Squires & Burgoyne et al., 2025), highlighting the complexity of the system's ability to ensure adequate support for diverse school-aged young people, such as those with dyslexia.

Researchers must continue to explore how inclusion can be achieved through equitable access to resources for the students. Empirical research offers exploration of the challenges that make inclusion a reality for school-aged children and young people with dyslexia since the SEND reforms in 2014, offering insight into how these can be addressed through school staff perspectives (Leitão & Dzidic et al, 2017; Lithari, 2019; Ross, 2021; Nnamani, 2024). However, researchers need to continue to explore the factors that affect equitable access to education for young people with dyslexia to shed light on the ongoing challenges school staff face in promoting equitable access for students with dyslexia.

There are research gaps that explore how research data are interpreted through the lens of dyslexic researchers. Additionally, theoretical gaps exist, particularly one that offers both the researchers' personal perspectives and their unique experiences as insiders with practical knowledge of the school system and its challenges in supporting young people with dyslexia, and as outsiders without such direct knowledge, shaping the understanding of what is known.

As a result, this paper investigates the provision for young people with dyslexia in schools in England since the SEND reforms in 2014. Drawing on the perspectives of an insider, a SENDCO, who works with children and young people with dyslexia, and an outsider, a researcher who has dyslexia, as a theoretical grounding for understanding the factors affecting the provision for learners with dyslexia in schools.

Theoretical underpinnings: Insider and outsider views

Qualitative research methods employ different techniques in collecting data from research participants. However, this study methodology aligns with the researchers' philosophical positions and is underpinned by interpretivist epistemology, concerned with how individuals make meaning of interactions within their social world. Interpretive research such as this is based on the assumption that researchers play a core role in shaping knowledge; their beliefs and values are embedded in and are brought forth in the interpretations of the research, which in turn, shape what is known in research (Cohen & Manion et al., 2007; Bukamal, 2022).

Such a constructivist approach to research draws on how the researcher makes sense of their reality. The researcher is an active agent who cannot be completely removed from the research process; thus, reflexivity is needed to make explicit the researcher's own

biases and positions about the research (Bryman, 2016; Bukamal, 2022). In this paper, we use the concept of 'insider' and 'outsider' to offer different views of phenomena. These perspectives not only question the researchers' stances on subjectivity and objectivity, but also their positions regarding the research participants (Griffiths, 1998). How a researcher feels can differ depending on whether they are an insider or an outsider.

A researcher is considered an 'insider' when they are part of the group in which they research or share some identity with the group (Gair, 2012). The 'outsider', on the other hand, is a researcher who does not belong to the group or share an identity with the participants of research (Breen, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Although it has been argued that even without being an insider of the group, one can still be an insider if they have some level of knowledge about the group in which they research (Hellawel, 2006). Rabe (2003) describes the status of insider and outsider as fluid, subject to change over time depending on circumstances.

Social research methods including participant observations or ethnography are examples of the fluidity of the phenomenon (Rabe, 2003) whereby the researcher initially an outsider, comes and immerses themselves with the community and adopts cultural norms, which in turn makes them better accepted as an insider and easier to conduct research in a manner that may be different from that outsider (Bishop, 1998; Liu & Burnett, 2022). Further, an insider in a certain aspect can also be an outsider in another aspect. For example, the insider in this paper is a SENDCO with 10+ years' experience in UK schools; the outsider has worked in social care for over 20 years. Both have PhDs investigating dyslexia, but from different perspectives. Both have dyslexia and have personally experienced schools in England as children, thus making them insiders in the context of dyslexia, but with a unique perspective as professionals (so outsiders looking in). Reflecting on one's position and the reasons for that position not only helps researchers understand how to address potential challenges but also reveals gaps in research on a particular issue (Serrant-Green, 2002).

For example, while the insider may possess superior knowledge of the research participants, including their rituals, colloquialisms, and activities, they may be biased because of their connection to the group. The insider plays an important role in dyslexia research, where the experiences of children and young people, as well as the challenges faced by school staff in promoting inclusive education, are often interpreted from the outsider's perspective. The outsider who may not have the same level of connection or understanding of the group's culture and norms may become less biased (Rabe, 2003; Hellawel, 2006; Liu & Burdett, 2022). On the other hand, the insider may be less biased than the outsider (Rabe, 2003; Hellawel, 2006; Liu & Burdett, 2022).

The question of homogeneity may arise in insider research, where group members may hold certain expectations of the insider researchers, leading to a clash when those

expectations are not met (Serrant-Green, 2002; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). In contrast, the outsider may be more inclined to be detached and neutral toward the participants (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015), which, in turn, can either impede or facilitate the retrieval of specific information. Sarrent-Green (2013) noted that participants can be more inclined to open up to strangers than to people they know.

The purpose of this research is not about determining who has superior knowledge or who the participants are likely to open up to. The insider or the outsider is to make evident the unique experiences and the contributions of researchers who are insiders and outsiders in shaping what is known about the challenges and opportunities that make access to equitable resources difficult for learners with dyslexia and opportunities for development. The insider and outsider's experiences are equally important in shaping how knowledge is conceived and portrayed in research relating to children and young people with dyslexia, as they offer a unique perspective on how the researchers' own personal experiences shape and inform what is known about SEND and dyslexia in mainstream schools.

This is a unique piece of research because it combines elements of autoethnography with qualitative research conducted with participants. Therefore, this paper contributes to knowledge by offering three perspectives: the participants', the insider researcher's, and the outsider researcher's. This is particularly important because, despite the insider and outside concepts that have been used by qualitative researchers from many disciplines, who have used methodological research to gain insight into certain phenomena, particularly in relation to culture and identity, (Liu & Burnett, 2022; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015), there is limited use in the field of education relating to SEND and inclusion policies and practices. This research contributes to knowledge by highlighting the importance of critically engaging with the literature and research on SEND policies and dyslexia inclusion among school staff.

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLING

Focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were conducted with school staff to investigate the impact of SEND policies on promoting dyslexia inclusion in mainstream secondary schools. These strategies were used to unpack the experiences and perceptions of research participants (Gill & Baillie, 2018). Focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews allow participants to provide insight into the effects of SEND policies on the inclusion of learners with dyslexia in mainstream schools and on their lives. The study recruited N=11 participants through purposive sampling, a non-probability method in which participants are selected based on their ability to provide valuable information in particular subject areas (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The researcher chose to contact as many schools as possible to maximise the response rate. Up to N= 200 mainstream secondary schools across England were contacted

through email between March and September 2023. Emails were addressed to the school SENDCO and the school administrator; in some cases, the headteacher was included. The response rate was poor, with very few responses, reflecting a general lack of urgency regarding research on dyslexia in mainstream schools.

One secondary school in London agreed to participate in the study, and 10 participants were recruited from the school. These comprised N=4 teachers, N=4 teaching assistants, N=1 SENDCO and N=1 deputy SENDCO. To capture the challenges at the management level, which affect what is happening at the classroom level, and to widen the relevance of the research by means of views from a different school and region, a N=1 headteacher (a member of the Senior Leadership Team-SLT) was recruited from a secondary school in Leicester, bringing the total number of participants to N=11 across the two academies. Teachers and teaching assistants participated in focus group discussions, while the head teacher, SENCO, and deputy SENCO were offered individual semi-structured interviews after ethical clearance.

All the participants were asked the same questions, with a few changes for teaching assistants. To avoid groupthink, all participants were presented with nine themes to identify effective strategies for promoting the social inclusion of dyslexic learners in mainstream schools in England. The themes included:

- ◆ Training
- ◆ Power dynamics
- ◆ Dyslexia challenges
- ◆ Funding
- ◆ Early intervention
- ◆ Time
- ◆ Assessment
- ◆ Collaboration
- ◆ Policies

These themes were drawn from the literature as factors affecting the learning experiences of students with SEND and dyslexia in schools (Maher, 2016; Ross, 2017; Nnamani, 2024). Participants were asked first to choose a theme to discuss. Once answered, the group was asked the remaining eight questions on the list regarding their views on SEND policies and the inclusion of children and young people with dyslexia in school.

The data were anonymised and analysed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Four themes were identified through inductive coding, a data-driven approach, following Braun and Clarke's (2019, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis.

RESULTS

Dyslexia is not a priority.

The school staff interviewed indicated that dyslexia is not a priority in school when it comes to arranging specialist assessments and interventions, as shown below.

“[If you] have autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (known as ADHD), there is a process that you go through, somebody makes a referral to school or your parents or your doctor... and then you're assessed, and the recommendations are made. If you have dyslexia, the likelihood is that you won't be assessed and won't get the interventions you need... You might be lucky, and you get the intervention that works with you, but you might not.” (Sadiq)

Sadiq also noted, *“If you suspect someone has autism, or ADHD, you can make a referral to the child and adolescent mental health service (known as CAMHS), and then the national health service (known as NHS) eventually does the assessment for them. With dyslexia, that isn't the case, so if you're lucky enough to have an assessor in your school, ... which is very rare.” (Sadiq)*

“Unless parents are willing to fund the cost of an assessment, then pupils go through school, and they're never assessed.” (Sadiq)

Sadiq's comments suggest that young people with dyslexia may be doubly disadvantaged at school, because not only is there a lack of a clear pathway for them to access assessment and intervention for their dyslexia, but also because some families cannot afford such assessments privately for their children. Mary's comment below suggests that, because of the complexity of prioritising young people with dyslexia for assessment, the school may not be able to implement effective interventions at the right time.

“And that's not because the school doesn't want to help. It's just they don't know what specific needs they're addressing.” (Mary)

On the other hand, Aishling, a school headteacher and a parent of a young person with dyslexia, believes that with effective funding, young people with dyslexia can be prioritised for support in school.

“Everything comes down to money, you know. If, if everything was better, better funded, then a lot of problems would disappear – or not disappear but would be understood and dealt with better” (Aishling).

Outsider view

As an outsider interacting with school staff about their experiences, it can be assumed that they feel frustrated by the unequal distribution of resources for learners with SEND. The school staff stated that they wanted to do more but felt powerless in their efforts, thus making them vulnerable in their attempts to promote equitable learning opportunities for learners with SEND. I also sensed that, because of the complexity faced by school staff, learners with dyslexia might be missing out on much-needed support, including referrals to specialist services, due to the unspoken assumption that dyslexia is less needy than other SEND needs (Alexander-Passe, 2017; Nnamani & Lomer, 2024). Because of this, dyslexic students can be the forgotten majority when it comes to availing of SEND provisions such as specialist intervention.

In retrospect, as a person with dyslexia who went through the school system without being identified (research cited in BBC (2019) suggests that 80% of those with dyslexia leave school unidentified), I formulated an impression about school staff, especially teachers. I thought that some teachers did not care about dyslexia or about children like me who, though they were struggling in the classroom, received no support or referral to a specialist service. Instead, I, along with some others, was assigned a seat at the classroom corner; this corner was known to be for those who were slow and troublesome, grouped as 'other.' Because of it, I never really fitted in or had a sense of belonging in the classroom. As a researcher, there are broader systemic issues preventing school staff from meeting the needs of learners with dyslexia, rather than a lack of willingness on their part (Alexander-Passe, 2017; Squires, 2023; Nnamani & Lomer, 2024).

Insider view

As a school SENDCO in both primary and secondary mainstream education, I observed that dyslexia is often less prioritised. In my experience, only one of the many local educational authorities (LA) I have worked with has a 'specific learning difficulties-SpLD/dyslexia' specialist teacher, whereas all of them have a team of autism specialists. This suggests that SpLD/dyslexia is not seen as a priority and that there is a perceived lack of urgency to provide specialist provision for students who are experiencing such difficulties.

If I have a young person with SpLD/dyslexia needing speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN) therapy, and I refer to an LA speech and language therapist (SLT), I am told that they do not support dyslexia. When pressed to say that they should work on specific areas that the young person struggles with, so specific traits rather than dyslexia as a whole, they are more willing to engage in supporting the young person. This reluctance reflects an opinion that SpLD/dyslexia is someone else's problem to support; however, they are unable to tell me who.

In schools, funding for SEND departments is limited, and headteachers ask SENDCOs like me to prioritise funding for the neediest. A hierarchy is agreed on, based on how much a young person with SEND might manifest behaviour or teacher concerns, so the top of the list is autism, followed by ADHD. Dyslexia is one of the lowest SEND needs, as it is perceived that a class teacher can support a young person with SpLD/dyslexia through 'Quality First Teaching,' however, the evidence suggests otherwise.

Access to EHCP can be complex.

Access to EHCP was a subtheme of the first theme because it highlights another way in which dyslexia is not prioritised as other SEND. The school staff suggest that young people with dyslexia may experience additional challenges in obtaining an EHCP for dyslexia, and that only those who can demonstrate an additional need may be eligible, thereby confirming that dyslexia is not seen as a severe or complex need beyond schools' own skills and funding.

"... it is amazing. If a dyslexic student gets an educational healthcare plan, I know that just for dyslexia, they will not get it. It must be some other need that gets addressed in an educational healthcare plan, and that's, that's the main, main challenge, right, just this ... dyslexia doesn't give you a plan". (Aishling)

"Trying to get access to things like education, healthcare plans is almost impossible if you have dyslexia, so unless you can somehow link it with something else ..." (Sadiq).

Outsider view

As a researcher who has spoken with parents and other stakeholders about the difficulties of accessing an EHCP for learners with SEND, it is clear that the process can be challenging, especially for learners whose conditions are not perceived as complex enough to warrant an EHCP. However, dyslexic students seem to be far worse because their dyslexic difficulties and challenges are often not easily recognised (Nnamani & Lomer, 2024), and some learners are good at masking these challenges, making it even more difficult to comprehend how complex they are (Alexander-Passe, 2015; 2017). Further, because dyslexia occurs in a continuum, some learners may have more complex special educational needs than others, according to the British Dyslexia Association (BDA) (2024).

According to the SEND Code of Practice (DFE, 2015), these needs should be catered for, in some cases, through an EHCP. However, the feedback from school staff indicates otherwise, thus suggesting a disconnect between policies and practice. The consequence of such disconnection is that the learner with dyslexia may continue to struggle throughout school. Having spoken with parents about the EHCP process, I also noticed that their frustration is often directed at the school for what they perceive as

insufficient effort to ensure a child is referred for an EHCP, which can cause tension between parents and the school. This research reveals the likely miscommunication in policy regarding SEND and the EHCP. The consequence of such disconnection is that learners with dyslexia who might benefit from an EHCP may continue to struggle through school and even fall behind their peers.

Insider view

I have been told by local authorities that dyslexia (SpLD) is not a high enough need to result in a successful EHCP application and that they require a secondary diagnosis to raise their need to the level of need requiring an EHCP. LAs believe that EHCPs are for the most severe young people, who have fallen at least three academic years behind their peers. It is a deficit model that requires a young person to fail before they can be helped. Many secondary diagnoses tend to be mental health or behaviour-based; therefore, secondary manifestations of unmet SEND support in school, again, support the concept that a young person must fail before receiving specialist support (Alexander-Passe, 2015).

Interestingly, with the right support, a young person with dyslexia can perform academically as well as their peers (Alexander-Passe, 2015). This has, in some cases, led to funding being removed because they are doing too well; however, removing their specialist support can cause a young person to fail again, evidencing that school staff alone are not sufficient to allow a dyslexic young person to succeed in mainstream education.

Early intervention can vary among teachers.

In addition to the complexity of the EHCP, the school staff suggest that early intervention is another factor that can affect equitable access to education for dyslexic students. They noted that although early intervention is important, its implementation and effectiveness depend on school staff's knowledge and prior experience, as well as their willingness to be proactive, as shown below.

"... the system isn't allowing them to demonstrate their ability. They need support in how to do that, because for them copying something from a board isn't, is a struggle". (Sadiq)

"... we... set up some early intervention... I tell my students straight away if the spelling is not marked in a particular ... specific questions. So, they don't have to stress about this." (Mary)

"... I use a lot of videos ... I repeat myself a lot, right? ... then, we use obviously something like help ... like resources to help. For example, it may not be an essay;

it may be a table or a mind map. Again, draw something rather than, um, rather than just write an essay. Use the mini whiteboard first before you attempt anything" (Mary)

"I've worked in schools before, where... everywhere there was like a pile of different coloured paper and reader graphics and stuff. That every time you print a worksheet off, you have a list of students in that class that need different coloured pieces of paper to go with that." (Ritchie)

"... I've got early intervention in terms of the earlier you catch it, the better... it's, it's a massive stigma that comes with [dyslexia] that is quite demotivating for a student who would find out that they have it." (Jade)

Outsider view

There is a recognition that while dyslexia may not be prioritised, and access to an EHCP can be challenging, making several adjustments in the classroom is a form of early intervention that can make learning accessible for all, including those with dyslexia, and in some cases, be just what the young person needs to thrive in school. However, it is also clear that some students may be embarrassed by receiving extra provisions that could make them stand out and appear different from their peers (Nnamani, 2024). Another thing that stood out during the discussion with the school staff is the recognition that the current state of testing students' knowledge has not taken into account the needs of learners with dyslexia and, as such, may be limiting their ability to demonstrate their knowledge due to ableist school policies. Dyslexia can cause processing difficulty as well as reading and spelling difficulties (BDA, 2024; Carroll & Holden et al., 2024), which means that in a timed exam setting, a learner with dyslexia may not achieve their potential (Armstrong & Squires, 2015), regardless of the efforts made in the classroom.

Listening to the account of the school staff made me reflect back on my school days when I went into an exam having studied, only to find myself not remembering any of the things I had revised and getting stuck in trying to read and process the written task. I never did well in those exams. Instead, I developed exam-related stress and anxiety, and over time, without support, I developed learned helplessness - the feeling that school was not for me and that there was no need to try to do homework or prepare for an exam or class test (Alexander-Passe, 2015; 2017), as I would never do well in them. I have met dyslexic people who share similar experiences. While I believe having teachers like Sadiq, Mary, or Ritchie would have eased some of the tensions I had in school, I also believe that, for young people to have equitable access to teaching and learning, effort must be made to ensure that classroom interventions match those provided during exams.

While some teachers are going out of their way to make provision for learners with dyslexia, others do not, creating inconsistencies in inclusion and suggesting that not all learners with dyslexia are getting a fair deal in school because of inconsistent classroom approaches.

Insider view

The participants suggest that early intervention is crucial yet challenging to achieve. I have also noticed the challenge in my practice. The Education (Baseline Assessment) (England) Regulations (Legislation.gov.uk, 1998) required schools to assess a young child on their first day at school. The aim was to create a baseline for teachers and schools to measure the value-added nature of schools and to gain early identification of learning difficulties. This legislation was based on research from educational experts. However, it was quickly found that the task was too great for schools, and this was quickly amended to the first term. Importantly, this fundamentally changed the power of such an assessment, moving from identifying early needs to teaching to pass it, effectively diluting any useful data.

This was relaunched as the 'Assessment Framework Reception Baseline Assessment' (Standards and Testing Agency (STA), 2020), a 20-minute assessment to be administered within the first 6 weeks of a pupil starting reception, therefore also allowing teaching to pass the assessment, which again effectively dilutes any useful data. Historical studies indicate that up to 80% of young people with dyslexia are not formally identified and supported during their school years, which supports the concept that such assessments are ineffective (BDA, 2025). Attempts to introduce a private members' bill requiring all school-aged young people to be screened for dyslexia at some point in their education career have been fruitless, thereby making early identification very difficult. This bill, now called the 'Neurodivergence (Screening and Teacher Training) Bill', has been amended to cover all young people who are neurodivergent (e.g., autism, ADHD, and dyslexia); however, it has not yet received government approval (UK Parliament, 2024–2026). Additionally, there is a lack of dyslexia teacher training, a knock-on effect of teachers lacking the ability to identify core difficulties and the confidence to refer to the SENDCO for help and advice, and possibly a diagnosis. The lack of dyslexia-specific teacher training can also result in teachers lacking confidence in providing 'quality first teaching' to SEND young people, and schools recognising the need for young people with dyslexia to receive specialist training.

The consequences of little or no intervention for young people with dyslexia are that it leads to frustration and learned helplessness in young people, leading to mental health manifestations, e.g. anxiety and depression (Alexander-Passe, 2015). Many such young people will give up on their learning, become truant, and develop emotionally based school avoidance (Alexander-Passe, 2015). For some, frustration and anxiety may be confused with being lazy and of low intelligence. Research also points to many getting

excluded and falling into crime, as part of the 'school to prison pipeline' (Alexander-Passe, 2023)

Teacher training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

As noted earlier, teacher training and continuous professional development are also important aspects for providing equitable support for young people with dyslexia. However, school staff believe there is inadequate teacher training, as noted below.

"Unfortunately, here, SEN isn't really part of the induction process for new teachers." (Sadiq)

"I feel like not enough people know what dyslexia is and how to actually work around it, especially in a teacher's environment." (Jade)

"... everybody expects schools and teachers to do everything, and we ... I'm a maths teacher. You know what I mean? I laugh sometimes, and I think I'm a maths teacher... If you ask me what training I have received on dyslexic students, I will say, probably an hour in 17 years. [So], what training have I received? Little to none, which is really ridiculous. As you know, what we're expected to be – social workers, teachers, parents." (Aishling)

Aishling also mentioned that there is an expectation that teachers teach diverse learners in their classrooms without training, which, in turn, creates problems for young people with dyslexia who may not receive the support they need for their learning.

Similarly, Sonya noted, 'But I do think giving training to the teachers to be able to identify, you know, diagnosed or undiagnosed those, those students and what it is that they can do for them in the classroom to make it easier and helpful, which will then – I think is an easier short term time goal rather than thinking about you know, um, waiting lists and policies.'

Sonya stated that, with training, teachers will be able to identify and support young people with dyslexia in their classrooms.

"I think that it would be quite useful if it was a policy that said all staff need to be trained on the three main neurodivergent needs of students in our classroom. And then you have to do it. It's a statutory expectation like safeguard – like a safeguarding training." (Joanne)

According to Sadiq, training is important because

"You can't take people out of lessons for that period of time, because then you get

criticised by Ofsted for denying people's access to the curriculum.” (Sadiq)

Similarly, Joanne would like to see greater policy focus on training school staff to teach and support neurodivergent students.

Outsider view

Teachers have an immense responsibility to teach diverse learners with little training and limited time to adapt their teaching for those who need a slower pace or more explanation, often with SEND. This might be an unrealistic expectation to fulfil in the absence of training through continuous professional development (Nnamani & Lomer, 2024). Efforts to remediate the challenges are diminished by the pressure to complete the curriculum, as I observed in my visit to a school.

Despite having direct contact with dyslexic learners, the school staff in the study, including the SENDCO, informed me that there is little professional development on dyslexia offered at the school. Efforts to understand dyslexia and effectively support learners have led some staff to take external dyslexia awareness courses to bridge knowledge gaps and learn appropriate classroom strategies.

During my visit to the school, I watched how busy the SENDCO and teachers were, between teaching and attending to students' needs. This made me appreciate why it would be nearly impossible for staff to engage in meaningful CPD in term time. This is further exacerbated by high staff turnover due to time and work pressures.

When I asked whether dyslexia could be covered during the teacher induction stage at their school, the staff felt it would be impossible, as the person in charge of the school's training lacked a good grasp of dyslexia and would therefore be unable to train others. Importantly, they recognised that mandatory dyslexia awareness training was needed to improve in-class provision and develop their understanding of dyslexia. So, although many requested dyslexia training, it was not provided. The consequences for children and young people with dyslexia are that it can result in loss of academic self-esteem, demotivation for learning. At the same time, some students engage in avoidant behaviour, which can affect learners without SEND, and those with SEND in the classroom who may be removed from the classroom as a result of their behaviour (Alexander-Passe, 2006; Syal & Torppa, 2019).

Insider view

Teacher training is key to developing the teaching workforce, so teachers have the skills to identify and refer for assessment, and to offer dyslexia-friendly provision in the classroom. As someone who relatively recently trained as a teacher, gaining a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) in 2011, there was one day of university-

based lectures on learning differences; whilst this included SEND, it also included gifted and talented students and English as an additional language (EAL). I offered to deliver a session on dyslexia to all the students as a published author and researcher in the field, but this was rejected, and a session on gifted and talented students was delivered instead, as I was told this was more relevant. In schools, as a class teacher, I never received any CPD on dyslexia, so when I was appointed a school SENDCO, this was the topic of my first session delivered to staff, as it accounted for the largest group of struggling learners in schools, at least 10% of each class, in some classes as high as 20% of students.

Teacher training has improved slightly since 2010-11, with more teachers now able to secure placements in SEND schools or schools with dedicated SEND provision. However, this does not mean all newly qualified teachers gain sufficient SEND knowledge to manage SEND students in their classrooms.

As an exam access assessor, I am surprised by how this part of the SENDCO role is dismissed as 'would be nice to do if there is time'. The skills I assess for possible examination allowances are:

- ◆ The ability to write for 10 minutes on a topic of their choice (so not based on specific subject knowledge)
- ◆ Spelling
- ◆ Reading comprehension
- ◆ Handwriting legibility
- ◆ Processing of information (splitting letters into words, and decoding letters to number combinations)
- ◆ Short-term and working memory

The above are key areas where those with dyslexia will struggle, and the ability to gain extra time, use a laptop, having a reader (firstly, to read the exam question, but also importantly to hear their work read back to them to check grammar and understanding), wear ear defenders, take rest breaks, use prompters, etc., is vital to creating an equitable, level playing field for gaining academic qualifications. If the above measures were used as a screening test when students join schools in year 7 and before starting the GCSE examination curriculum at the start of year 9, many more with dyslexia would be identified and given the support to achieve their potential at school, and the self-esteem and self-worth that they can achieve academically, given the right support and encouragement, rather than being blamed for messy handwriting or 'not trying hard enough' (Alexander-Passe, 2026).

In one school where I was SENDCO, I screened every child in years 2 to 8, enabling early interventions for literacy difficulties. This needs to take place in every school annually.

DISCUSSION

Perceptions of SEND and inclusion policy and practice.

This paper identifies the perceptions of SEND with schoolteachers, leaders and researchers as 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Its findings suggest that inclusion should be happening, but it's not, as there is no time amid all the other pressures class teachers may face. As such, support earlier research findings (MacBeath et al., 2006), that the education system places too many demands on teachers and schools, thus creating tensions between achieving standards and being inclusive (Squires, 2023; Nnamani & Lomer, 2024). In many ways, inclusion policies seem to be a tick-box exercise for schools. However, in practice, they are not used or considered on a day-to-day basis, partly because tensions and assumptions about inclusion are not well addressed in their school policies (Nnamani & Lomer, 2024).

Even though previous studies have highlighted the same issues, ambiguity and contradictions have prevailed, with little change (Ainscow & Booth et al., 2006; Lamb, 2009; Norwich & Eaton, 2015). In September 2024, it was announced that OFSTED, the UK's school inspectorate, would make an 'inclusion' judgment in all inspections moving forward (OFSTED, 2024). This is a recognition that there is a need for better inclusion, which is not currently being delivered in all schools. Commentators, frustratingly, find that 90% of schools still pass this 'inclusion' criterion (Roberts, 2026). Of 877 Ofsted reports published this year up to the end of April 2026, 13 have been graded 'exceptional' on inclusion, 320 were graded as 'strong standard', 450 were at the 'expected standard', 81 were graded as 'needs attention' and 13 as 'urgent improvement'. This is argued to run contrary to government reports suggesting a lack of inclusion in school, which are triggering the biggest SEND reforms in a decade.

Nicole Dempsey, director of SEND and safeguarding at Dixons Academies Trust (Roberts, 2026), which runs 21 schools in the North of England, believes the reality lies somewhere between the two. She believes that separating inclusion into its own distinct evaluation area is a mistake. "The minute you pull inclusion out as something separate to be ticked off, it ceases to be inclusion. Inclusion needs to be interwoven through the education a school provides," she says, adding that Ofsted's framing of inclusion "is a little superficial".

Lack of inclusion can lead to secondary problems for young people with dyslexia. Figures from the Timpson Report on Exclusions (Crown, 2019) indicate elevated levels of suspensions and exclusions in schools amongst young people with SEND. According to the latest 2022-23 figures from the UK's Department for Education, it has increased significantly from 2021-22, suggesting a problem (DFE, 2024). Research indicates high levels of students being sent to alternative education (e.g., pupil referral units) with EHCPs and undiagnosed learning difficulties (Crown, 2019; DFE, 2024).

Although critics argued that outsourcing young people with SEND to alternative education is a ploy to manage and maintain law and order in the mainstream classroom (Daniels & Thompson et al., 2019). It is argued that, through discriminatory behaviour policies that exclude students with SEND, some children miss out on the full curriculum offered in mainstream schools (Daniels & Thompson et al., 2019). Those with dyslexia, in the majority of cases, remain undiagnosed in schools and rely on parents to gain external, privately funded assessments. However, when a parent presents a private diagnosis report with recommendations, it is often rejected as biased and unworkable. At the same time, some young people from working-class backgrounds are less likely to be assessed for dyslexia and gain advocacy (MacDonalds & Deacon, 2019).

SEND priorities in school, where does dyslexia lie in the pecking order?

Our findings suggest that dyslexia may lie at the lower end of the SEND priorities pecking order in some schools. It also suggests that after supporting students with autism and ADHD, dyslexia comes in the next group of difficulties/differences, leading to delayed interventions secondary behavioural (e.g. avoidance, anger, frustration, property damage, and violence) and mental health conditions (e.g. anxiety and depression, and in some cases self-harm), as a result of thinking they are stupid and 'cannot learn' (Sorrenti & Spadaro et al., 2019; Lithari, 2019; Nnamani & Lormer, 2024).

The perception among many school leaders is that dyslexia is a low-level SEND need that can be adequately supported in the classroom by all teachers, despite most teachers not having received targeted dyslexia training or having the time to deliver such support whilst teaching class sizes of up to 30 students per topic.

CONCLUSION

This paper draws on the insider/outsider perspective to explore the provision for children and young people with dyslexia in school. It asks, 'Are school-aged young people with dyslexia getting a fair deal in schools?' The evidence suggests that those with dyslexia are not getting a fair deal at school because of a lack of screening and assessment.

Teachers are expected to identify struggling students. Such expectations, along with a high number of children in a classroom with diverse learning needs, a lack of teacher training in this regard, and a high workload, can result in late identification and intervention for young people with dyslexia.

The also shows that dyslexia as a special educational needs (SEND), when compared to other complex needs is not prioritised for specialist input, and assessment for EHCP except there is an additional condition involved, which in some cases, mean that some children have to fail first, or develop negative secondary manifestations (e.g. anxiety, depression, self-harm, attention-seeking, behavioural concerns), before they can be

prioritised for the support they need. However, the support offered tends to focus on managing secondary manifestations of frustration, rather than core learning difficulties, which are at the heart of the frustration. This is not equity, but a discrimination against young people with dyslexia in school and a breach of the UK's 2010 Equality Act (Legislation.gov.uk, 2010), preventing them from accessing education that meets their learning needs.

For school-aged young people with dyslexia to get a fair deal in schools, they must be prioritised for educational support to thrive. Teachers need CPD training on how to effectively support young people with dyslexia and other diverse learners in their classrooms by modifying the curriculum without lowering expectations. As dyslexia is a spectrum difference, you will have students who can achieve highly (if the teacher marks their oral contributions in class) and poorly (if the teacher marks their written contributions), hence why quality-first teaching is important, along with marking both oral and written contributions, and then asking why the difference—asking 'why' is critical to making a referral for further investigations.

Strengths

This paper draws on the insider/outsider perspective to explore the provision for children and young people with dyslexia in school. Both the insider and outsider researchers have dyslexia and have experienced English schools as children. The insider researcher is a SENDCO with extensive experience working in the school system, and the outsider researcher is a social care worker who has recently completed her PhD on dyslexia. This reflected on her own perspectives, reflections, and thoughts regarding the transcripts of her school staff sample, in an effort to highlight the complex feelings that arise from interpreting the research data as both an insider and an outsider researcher. This is a novel methodology in dyslexia research, yet it offers an insight into how researchers' perspectives can shape their research.

LIMITATION

This study involved N=11 participants, including teaching assistants, teachers, SENDCOs, and a head teacher, from two academy schools in England, who provided detailed contributions across the board. Although academy schools are state-funded, they have greater control over their operations than other state-funded schools do. The results cannot be generalised as these schools do not represent the different perspectives of staff in all mainstream schools across England; therefore, further research with participants from a wider cohort of schools is needed. Additionally, replicating this study in other contexts, including Asian countries, would help clarify the challenges and opportunities faced by school staff in providing equitable access to education for young people with SEND in those countries.

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