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Understanding exam access arrangements in practice: Challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

Secondary students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD) often face challenges with academic tasks, particularly with high-stakes examinations. Exam access arrangements (EAA) are provided as reasonable adjustments to reduce disadvantage for students with SpLD. However, the application process for EAA has become increasingly bureaucratic, requiring extensive documentation and formal assessment. The number of applications for AA continues to rise, adding pressure to schools and examination bodies, underscoring the need for a comprehensive analysis of the current landscape around EAA provision. The present study captured current practices and provisions around identifying the need for AA for students with SpLD, the nature of support offered and barriers to effective provision. Semistructured interviews with 35 practitioners (21 special educational needs' coordinators (SENCOs); 14 specialist assessors) working in secondary schools in England identified three themes: 'the importance of equity in identification', 'resources impact identification and support' and 'lack of consistency and a systematic approach'. Findings highlighted the complexities of identifying and assessing students for EAAs, the need for better communication with stakeholders and the need to provide clearer guidance covering identification, implementation and training for students on EAA use. Findings also uncovered continued inequities, with eligibility for EAA as well as access to best practice in arranging accommodations partially influenced by resourcing. Structured guidance in effective identification, assessment and implementation processes

with student training programmes, and specifically dedicated resources, could help address disparities and ensure more equitable support.

KEYWORDS
examination access arrangements, literacy difficulties, support

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The paper provides a comprehensive account of the challenges experienced by practitioners in providing support for examinations in secondary schools in England. Highlighting the challenges enables us to identify practical implications that schools may wish to act upon to improve the nature of exam support offered.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Variation is observed in the identification and support offered for examination access arrangements (EAA). Resourcing (i.e. space, staffing and technology) impacts on decision-making and state schools appear the most constrained in this respect. Greater focus is needed on training students how to use EAA.

INTRODUCTION

The number of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and recorded as receiving SEN support in primary and secondary schools in England continues to rise each year (Department for Education [DfE], 2024). Educational outcomes for students with SEN in upper secondary education in England (Key Stage 4) are often reported to be lower compared to students without SEN. For example, in formal national examinations—the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs)—only 36% of students with SEN secured Grade 4 or above in Maths and English GCSEs in the 2022/2023 academic year, compared to 72.4% of those with no identified SEN (DfE, 2023). Given the pressures for schools to perform well in high-stake examinations and related national league tables (Jerrim et al., 2024), an investigation into the support offered to students with SEN for exam purposes is warranted.

Students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD) represent one of the largest groups receiving SEN support in secondary schools in England (DfE, 2024) and other areas worldwide, such as the United States (NCES, 2023). SpLD is characterised by a difficulty in one or more specific aspects of learning and is an umbrella term used to cover a range of diagnoses such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia (Code of Practice; DfE/DoH, 2015). Research has consistently shown that children and young people with dyslexia present with reading difficulties (Snowling et al., 2020), have significant challenges with producing written text (Sumner et al., 2013; Sumner & Connelly, 2020) and poor working memory and speed of processing (Carroll et al., 2024): all skills that are crucial for exams. Similarly, children with developmental coordination disorder (often termed 'dyspraxia') have difficulty with producing writing at speed (Prunty et al., 2013), while core characteristics of children

with dyscalculia include information processing difficulties (Iuculano et al., 2008). Students with SpLD are also disproportionly underrepresented in post-secondary education, suggesting lower engagement in higher education (Higher Education Statistics Authority, 2024; Richardson & Wydell, 2003). Considering the noted SEN attainment gaps and the high prevalence of SpLD (DfE, 2024), it is important to understand how students with SpLD are being supported to access school exams, demonstrate their abilities and remove barriers to high-stakes assessments.

Examination access arrangements (EAAs)[i] are reasonable adjustments specifically designed to ensure students are assessed fairly and can demonstrate their abilities effectively without being disadvantaged by the exam format but, importantly, without changing the objectives of the exams (Joint Council for Qualifications [JCQ], 2024a). EAAs are used internationally (Rodeiro & Macinska, 2023) and may include, but are not limited to, use of extra time, word processors, readers and scribes and modified exam materials (JCQ, 2024a). EAAs should be available to all students who meet the eligibility criteria regardless of their school setting and funding (e.g. privately funded vs. state-funded schools). Encouragingly, research suggests that EAAs may improve test confidence and self-efficacy for students with SEN, which in turn is associated with better performance (Feldman et al., 2011). Given the core characteristics of SpLD, it is also conceivable that allowing more time to complete an exam would help to reduce the gap between the exam outputs and subsequent exam success of SpLD and non-SpLD students. Indeed, a study based in UK Higher Education found that students with SpLD wrote more when using a word processor and with 25% extra time to complete an exam compared to writing by hand without additional time, albeit still underperforming relative to their peers without SpLD (Duncan & Purcell, 2019). Similarly, US researchers found that extra time afforded students with SpLD the opportunity to answer more questions, although again still not matching their peers' outcomes (Lewandowski et al., 2008; Lovett, 2010).

In the United Kingdom, the JCQ establishes the criteria for EAAs and oversees the application process for the examination awarding bodies. Some EAAs, such as supervised rest breaks or modified papers, are centre-delegated, meaning the school can determine the appropriateness of the arrangement, while other EAAs, such as extra time, require an application to the JCQ, supported by evidence of need. The required evidence must meet the JCQ criteria for eligibility for specific EAAs, and the identified arrangement(s) must reflect a student's normal way of working and be documented by detailed file notes with teacher feedback (JCQ, 2024a). Of note, students with SpLD in the absence of co-occurring difficulties require formal assessment using a range of standardised cognitive and/or literacy tests to evidence need, while students with medical conditions or other types of SEND (e.g. physical or sensory impairments; speech, language and communication needs) may not require the same formal assessments. Instead, their needs can be evidenced through medical reports or existing records from the school's SEN department or external professionals. Thus, staff involved in supporting EAA (i.e. primarily the school Special Educational Needs Coordinator [SENCO], assessors, class teachers and examination officers; although roles may vary in different settings) must build a specific case for students with SpLD who may require EAA. Furthermore, the JCQ publishes revised guidance each year and assessors must keep up to date with any changes to ensure they follow the latest guidance on each EAA. Altogether, the process of identifying and assessing needs, collating evidence and keeping track of any changes to regulations can be time-consuming and bureaucratic, increasing an already high workload (McGhee & Masterson, 2022).

The JCQ has mandated that the school SENCO[ii] manages EAA applications. The statutory SENCO role is multi-faceted, with responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy and often additional teaching responsibilities (Curran & Boddison, 2021), particularly those in the maintained sector (e.g. state schools following the National Curriculum).

The SENCO workload has been acknowledged as demanding. A survey conducted by Curran et al. (2018) found that 74% of 1900 SENCOs in England reported they did not have enough time to ensure all students with SEND were supported with the provision they need. Related to EAAs, SENCOs can only carry out the formal assessments needed to meet the JCQ criteria if they have obtained a Level 7 Diploma (or equivalent) in SpLD. Alternatively, and likely dependent on financial constraints, schools may employ a qualified specialist assessor to assess students' needs. McMurray et al. (2018) have emphasised the importance of extensive formative training to ensure that assessors have the necessary skills to conduct appropriate assessments for pupils with SpLD. McGhee and Masterson (2022) found that more than half of their sample of 513 UK SENCOs and Assessors reported the administrative burden of EAAs as overwhelming. These findings echo earlier reports from SEN professionals about the time-consuming nature of EAA applications, additionally complicated with yearly updates and changes to the process (Woods, 2007; Woods et al., 2018). Yet, recent statistics demonstrate a yearly upward trend in the number of approved EAAs (Ofqual, 2024). An increase in the volume of EAAs will likely lead to even greater pressure on the SEN team in terms of time spent testing pupils, the volume of paperwork to prepare for JCQ and subsequently provisions to enact. It is, however, unknown what impact these related factors have in providing effective exam support. Recent survey data have further highlighted time and availability of resources to be a significant challenge cited by SENCOs when providing EAAs, as well as lacking confidence in how to implement training to use EAAs (Sumner et al., 2025).

The present study

EAAs are one crucial way in which schools may support students with SpLD to better demonstrate their knowledge in high-stakes examinations. However, with increasing need comes additional pressures on schools and an analysis of the current state of play is warranted. Previous research has focused on the manageability of the EAA process (McGhee & Masterson, 2022; Woods, 2007; Woods et al., 2018), but what is missing is an understanding of the barriers to providing effective support, which can lead to raising direct implications for school leaders to consider. The present study broadly aimed to conduct a baseline investigation around current provision and practices that are intended to facilitate equity for students with SpLD. This was achieved through the lens of SENCOs and Specialist Assessors, given their essential role in identifying needs and assessing for EAAs. Their perspectives were captured by exploring how students with SpLD are being identified and supported, where variation across settings may exist and why, current challenges, and how things could be improved. A focus on supporting students with dyslexia (literacy difficulties) was decided upon to be more specific about practices and implications.

METHODS

Semi-structured interviews were used to gain an in-depth understanding of SENCOs' and Assessors' typical practice and perspectives on providing access arrangements for secondary students with SpLD. Secondary schools in England cover the age range 11–16 (Department for Education, 2014).

Participants

Criteria for inclusion in this study were that participants were (i) qualified SENCOs or specialist assessors working in secondary schools in England and (ii) had experience of identifying and/or assessing students in need of an EAA. Participants were recruited via various means: (1) relevant forums and social media (e.g. Facebook EAAs forums or SENCO groups, Twitter/X), (2) the team's mailing list, which comprised school contacts across England that had been part of teacher/specialist training courses in the past and (3) if they had indicated they would be interested in taking part in the broader project. In total, 35 practitioners (21 SENCOs and 14 Specialist Assessors; 3 males) took part in an interview, each from different secondary schools across England. Both state and independent schools were recruited, as both adhere to JCQ regulations. Table 1 provides demographic data for the sample. Participants were roughly evenly split between state and independent schools, and most were based in London ($n=23$, 65.71%), although representation was shown across England. The sample could be considered experienced, with close to a third coordinating access arrangements for 6–10 years ($n=11$, 31.42%) and another third of the sample being in this role for 10+ years ($n=12$, 24.38%).

TABLE 1 An overview of the demographics of SENCO/SAs who participated in interviews.

Characteristics	Number of participants ($n=35$)
Role	
SENCO[a]	21
Specialist assessor	14
Type of school[b]	
Independent	11
Local authority-maintained schools	10
Grammar	1
Academy	2
Specialist	2
Working across range of schools	9
Region of England	
London	23
Southeast	6
East	2
West Midlands	1
Northwest	1
Southwest	2
Length of time coordinating access arrangements	
<1 year	5
1–5 years	7
6–10 years	11
>10 years	12

[a]One SENCO was also an Assistant Headteacher, another SENCO was a designated Inclusion Lead, and one SENCO was a SEN consultant across schools.

[b]Types of school: Local authority-maintained schools are state-schools that follow the national curriculum; academy schools are state-schools independent from the local authority (run by not-for-profit trusts) that can follow a different curriculum; those responding as working across schools were specialist assessors who worked externally (private practice).

Materials

An interview schedule was developed after reviewing the existing literature on EAA provision (e.g. McGhee & Masterson, 2022; Woods et al., 2018) and identifying knowledge gaps. Woods et al. (2018) used a survey to ask SENCOs and assessors about how they perceived the manageability and fairness of EAA. McGhee and Masterson (2022) also used a survey to collect information on the training routes taken to assess for EAA, as well as the tests used in the assessment process and then followed up with interviews to explore training routes further and to again ask about the manageability of EAA. While the existing findings highlighted the procedural aspects of EAA and the challenges in terms of managing the administrative load, we sought to explore the reasons why EAA may be unmanageable and if this differs across settings. Another important gap that was identified was what schools are doing to support the use of EAA (e.g. how EAA are monitored and if training happens). Semi-structured interviews allowed a platform for more in-depth discussion on these topics. Specifically, participants were asked to reflect on their typical practice of (1) identifying students with SpLD as needing EAAs, (2) the nature of support offered, (3) how arrangements are monitored, (4) what works well and (5) if there are any barriers to providing support. The schedule was flexible and comprised follow-up questions and probes to generate further explanation from participants if required. Feedback on the schedule was provided by two professionals to ensure clarity of the interview questions. The schedule was piloted for accessibility and validity of the questions. Small adjustments were made to the interview schedule following the pilot process; these were minor changes to the wording of questions.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained via UCL Institute of Education, Faculty of Education and Society Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided written informed consent. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted online (over Zoom). Interviews lasted between 25 and 60 minutes ($M = 51.84$, SD = 3.59), were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed inductively, using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic approach. A predominantly inductive approach was adopted for this analysis, meaning data were open-coded and respondent/data-based meanings were emphasised. A degree of deductive analysis was, however, employed to ensure that the open-coding contributed to producing themes that were meaningful to the research aim of capturing current practice, barriers and best practice, and to ensure that the respondent/data-based meanings that were emphasised were relevant. Initial line-by-line coding across the whole data set was first completed and then initial codes were collated into potential themes and then shaped into final themes. The research team, who have professional backgrounds in psychology and SEN, met regularly to discuss data analysis. Initial themes were revised following team discussions about possible overlap. Quotations are marked with an identifier denoted by role (SENCO or specialist assessor [SA]), setting (independent [i], state [s], specialist [sp], grammar [g], academy [a] or as an external assessor across schools [e]) and followed by a numerical study identifier (e.g. SAe_11).

RESULTS

Three overarching themes, each comprised of subthemes, were identified (see Figure 1). The first theme '*the importance of equity in identification'* captures the underlying principles guiding EAAs and practitioners' objective to maintain equity. The second theme *'resources impact identification and support'* describes how resources impact practice and decision-making. Finally, the third theme *'lack of consistency and a systematic approach'* refers to the variation in practice which may be driven by the complexity of the system, gaps in knowledge, access to resources and lack of clarity around roles. Each theme is discussed in turn below.

Theme 1: The importance of equity in identification

Regardless of setting, all participants indicated that the purpose of an EAA was to create a 'level playing field' so that all students would have an equal opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge in exams. Most participants expressed confidence in their ability to ensure equality when identifying students who are eligible for EAAs, adhering to JCQ guidelines. Yet, some participants noted challenges, such as managing expectations of stakeholders in maintaining equitable practices. Within this theme, two subthemes were identified: (i) *Ensuring equitable support while adhering to the JCQ guidelines* and (ii) *Managing expectations of stakeholders*.

Ensuring equitable support while adhering to JCQ guidelines

Participants demonstrated a strong commitment to minimising inequalities among students when identifying those who need EAAs. They consistently expressed that the JCQ guidelines help make this process fairer. Moreover, participants recognised the importance of providing EAAs and felt a responsibility to ensure they did not confer any unfair advantages:

> …my [priority] is that we're being fair, we're levelling the playing field
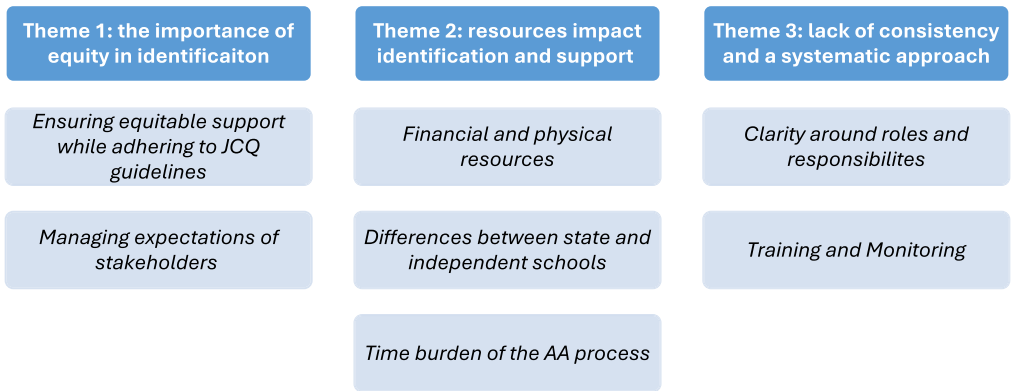>
> (SENCO_8i)

FIGURE 1 SENCOs' and assessors' experiences of the access arrangements process: Themes and subthemes.

In recent updates, the JCQ specifies that EAAs should be based on evidence of need and the student's 'normal way of working' and do not mandate the use of dyslexia diagnostic reports for granting EAAs. Most participants expressed that this specific guidance increased equity by preventing the purchase of expensive private diagnostic assessments to guarantee an EAA, thus disadvantaging students with SpLD who cannot easily access such an assessment in qualifying for an EAA. Some also expressed concern about the nature of outside reports whereby professionals are not aware of these regulations, and how they may lead to false hope for some students as schools may not be able to act on recommendations in externally commissioned SpLD reports if they do not align with JCQ regulations:

> ….At one point I did a count. From 900 students, I had 250 Ed Psych [Educational Psychologists] reports… Every one of them commissioned, all bar one of them said the child should have extra time.
>
> (SENCO_4i)

> "[external reports] can really conflict with the SENCOs' knowledge and expertise, with the parents who have had their expectations raised, and then me as an assessor coming in, and I do almost every assessment in the book to try to find some evidence to support their access arrangements, but often can't find that."
>
> (SA_1e)

Some participants lamented the absence of uniform assessment standards for EAA applications, suggesting this may undermine national consistency. Ambiguity around assessment options meant that some participants could assess exhaustively with a range of different assessments (e.g. using different subtests that they had available to test the same skill) until the JCQ criteria are met, while others reported that they only had capacity to test students using the one or two assessments they had available and could not explore further. This left some participants feeling conflicted about whether assessment practices were fair when they rely on the resources available in the school. Specifically, participants questioned whether those schools that had a reduced battery of tests were unfairly penalising students and reducing their chance of eligibility for EAA:

> I think my whole issue is fairness and sort of equality between settings, between students. And I don't know whether I would even sort of say, actually, I would quite like JCQ to publish a set list of tests that have to be done on all students that you're putting forward [for an EAA application]…. Because then at least you know that every student in the country is being given the same tests… I don't know whether that's fair or feasible.
>
> (SA_9e)

Managing expectations of stakeholders

Participants faced challenges in balancing the expectations of various stakeholders, including teachers, the school community, parents and students, while maintaining equity across students. Interviews highlighted disparities in understanding EAAs in these groups, leading to unrealistic expectations; some parents and students viewed EAAs as a competitive advantage or an entitlement following a private assessment. This created undue pressure on SENCOs and assessors to secure EAAs, often leading to tensions over fairness, especially

for students without strong parental advocacy. This issue was notably prevalent in independent schools, where fee-paying parents often felt their child was entitled to EAAs, regardless of demonstrated need:

> There's just times when you think, 'do you really need extra time?' You know, is this fair? Are we levelling the playing field or are we actually advantaging our pushier parents or students?
>
> (SA_7s)

> This student here has nobody advocating for them. Their needs are greater than the one that's shouting, and they should be a priority, and I can't put something in place…, and I completely get why you have to stop shouty parents because they are the ones that will go down the legal route, and that takes up even more of our time.
>
> (SA_10e)

> I've had phone calls from the mum, who says. "Well, my child's had an offer from [name of place] for you know A* EAA [school grades] but they're only on ABB, please could you arrange for them to have time so they can get those grades?"
>
> (SENCO_4i)

Similarly, participants noted that many students feel exam anxiety and pressure to do well and sometimes view EAAs as an advantage. Here, some participants felt pressured by students to grant EAAs and in some instances noted students trying to cheat (get lower scores) while being assessed for an EAA:

> I can spot cheating as well, because again that that's another game that seems to happen in the private school.
>
> (SENCO_4i)

Some participants reflected on the stigma around EAAs, which resulted in students choosing not to use the help, and how some students saw EAAs as an unfair advantage, even if they struggled:

> A lot of the kids, and even the parents can see it as detrimental to their progression.
>
> (SENCO_13s)

> I think there is that misunderstanding….you still have the parents that don't understand what it [EAA] is, or not even heard of it. Or ones that do get an idea of it but think it's cheating. "Oh, no, he can do it without" And it's just trying to explain that.
>
> (SA_5e)

Many participants noted that they also experienced pressure from the wider school. Teachers and schools feel pressure themselves to make sure students score well on exams as it is a reflection on their teaching:

> [When asked where the pressure on the SENCO comes from] From the wider school. A bit from parents, but from the wider school because of the pressure in terms of results. And that's why some SENCOs have decided not to encourage the teacher referrals.
>
> (SENCO_21i)

It was evident that external pressures from stakeholders could be time-consuming and a hindrance to the fairness of timely identification and implementation of support processes. Participants described the measures they adopted to promote fairness when faced with pressure from parents, students or the wider school. For example, participants used the JCQ regulations to justify their decisions, thereby helping to maintain a level of equity among students:

> And all the ones who never seem to use [extra time] I write to the parents and say your child won't be getting extra time in the future, and then the parents write back, saying, 'But I insist they are', and then I write long letters with the JCQ criteria. And then how many minutes (of) not used extra time in the last 12 months or so.
>
> (SENCO_4i)

Theme 2: Resources impact identification and support

Although participants agreed that the central goal of providing EAAs was to limit inequalities, there was still significant variation in this practice across participants and settings. The second theme describes one of the biggest impacting factors that led to variation in identification and supporting EAAs: resources. Some felt that they had sufficient resources to identify and support every student that needed an EAA; however, there were others who did not have the capacity to screen and assess all students who may need an EAA or to implement any extra support, such as training staff or students on the effective use of their EAA. Within this theme, three subthemes were identified (i) *Financial and physical resources*, (ii) *Differences between state and independent schools* and (iii) *Time burden of the EAA process*.

Financial and physical resources

The availability—or lack thereof—of financial and physical resources led to variation in EAA identification and support. Participants described the need to consider the availability of their resources such as funding, the number of physical spaces for separate invigilation or staff time. Some participants began making these considerations even from the point of accepting students to the school:

> So we often get lots of applications from children who would potentially struggle with examinations. But we have to, from the point of entry to the school, almost make sure that we're able to provide potential access arrangements for students when they join in year seven, and just purely because of the actual physical space that's required to implement them all.
>
> (SENCO_2i)

> I think resourcing does come into it. I used to work in a private school where that just wasn't an issue whereas here in a state-school, it is a bigger issue. We are having to think about how many we're assigning laptops to, because we provide those laptops for years up to the end of Key Stage 4.
>
> (SA_4s)

Lack of staff time, IT support and physical space may also guide the decision to avoid using certain resource-heavy EAAs such as scribes and selecting alternative provisions instead, or even removing arrangements altogether:

> I haven't actually ever recommended children doing things in a separate room, partly because I think it's, that's quite directive to a school. I think it's quite hard, you know, it's not always easy to do. They might not necessarily have the staffing actually to be able to do this.
>
> (SA_3e)

> The other thing that happened last year was that they [senior management] took all access arrangements away from Years 7-9, apart for those with EHCPs, because they couldn't support it. They couldn't support the extra time because it had timetabling issues. If we were giving kids extra time, it meant that they had to go over lessons and then there were staffing issues and implications. So they said we can't support this, we can't do this. So Years 7-9 they had no access arrangements.
>
> (SENCO_7s)

Financial constraints impacted decisions around the assessment and provision of EAAs. Some participants felt limited in their ability to support all students due to budget cuts imposed by senior leaders, with inadequate funding potentially preventing them from fully identifying and assessing every student in need:

> I think there may be students that we miss by any type of intervention or exam support, but I know that to a certain extent, if you go further [with assessment], we can't support them anywhere. We don't have the resources. So, I don't know if that stops me doing things sometimes, or looking back and saying actually, we need to re-assess you or we need to offer X, Y, Z, because we just can't do it.
>
> (SENCO_5s)

Lack of financial resources can also impact the amount of training for staff, which can affect the teachers' knowledge and understanding around EAAs. Resourcing issues also affect the SEN team's capacity to engage with annual JCQ training and guidance updates in terms of allocating time to discuss and disseminate these updates via wider staff training:

> So…they really want to upskill staff, but right now the budget's so tight.
>
> (SENCO_13s)

State versus independent schools

It was evident that a significant disparity exists between state and independent schools regarding the availability of resources, which in turn impacts identification and provision of EAAs. Participants from independent or specialist settings reported having sufficient resources to ensure comprehensive identification and support for EAAs, whereas their counterparts in state-funded schools faced the challenge of strategically allocating limited resources. Participants with experience in both school types explicitly highlighted these disparities, noting that the greater resource availability in independent schools led to more effective identification and support compared to state schools:

> I think, because we (are a) private school and parents are paying a lot of money… if something is needed, then, generally the money is found for it. It's very different from when I worked in the State-school it's just incredibly different. So, you know we we've always got enough.
>
> (SENCO_4i)

> You know the disparity between the two [independent and state-schools], because … in an independent sector we used to hire in laptops… we did it for mocks as well sorry we did it for mocks and the exam period. I mean, you know that's probably in the region of about £8,000 to hire them in and organise that level. And then in the State-school there just isn't that budget.
>
> (SENCO_1i)

Participants from independent schools reported having large SEN teams and in-house specialists or were able to buy-in time from an assessor to help with assessments. The extra personnel allowed them to conduct comprehensive screening and assessments of pupils, while resourcing was affecting assessment access for participants in state schools:

> We're very lucky in an Independent School and this is where one of the parities comes out in that there is a team of six of us in learning support, which is amazing. And there are three of us that are fully qualified as assessors and specialist teachers. And we have one teacher that we've just taken on who is doing assessment qualifications so that we can have another assessor in-house. So in terms of resources, our [students] are very, very lucky.
>
> (SA_11i)

> Ah, no, we (state-school) don't go any further than that [two scores that meet the JCQ criteria] because we just don't have time. We haven't got time
>
> (SENCO_7s)

However, variation can still be observed within the state sector, as one specialist assessor based in a state school spoke positively about their availability of technology and staff to support EAA and did not feel that resources were a barrier to support:

> I am not aware ever of a student not getting what they are deemed to need because we don't have the resources. We seem to have throughout the school quite a few laptops. That doesn't seem to have been an issue so far. Our teaching assistants act as scribes and readers, so they just get pulled out of lessons.
>
> (SA_7s)

Time burden of the EAA process

All participants remarked that the EAA process was very time-consuming from the point of identification to providing and monitoring EAAs. The amount of time they could allocate to EAAs was limited, but consideration of time management impacts their decision-making and practice in identification, assessment, monitoring, training students on how to use EAAs, training staff and seeking further training themselves:

> I think it's lack of time as well to manage the access arrangements in a school. I mean, that is my biggest problem with time management in terms of managing the amount of access arrangements and the amount of paperwork that's required, electronic or on paper …to prepare for a JCQ inspection and follow the regulations. The time that takes is immense.
>
> (SENCO_1i)

There was an appreciation that the JCQ regulations state that there should be a specific amount of time allocated to the role of identifying students in need of an EAA. However, many participants felt that this was not typically done in practice and that the time needed for EAAs was too variable to calculate accurately:

> And in the JCQ regulations, it says now that all head(s) should give SENCOs the appropriate amount of time to complete this. What's the appropriate amount of time? It's a nice sentiment but it holds no value.
>
> (SENCO_12s)

It was useful for some participants to split the EAAs' roles between the SENCO and an assessor. While using an in-house assessor was beneficial in terms of knowing students better and having a better idea of their profile, they could be interrupted by other tasks. Buying in an independent assessor solved this issue but meant that they might not know the students very well or have the entire picture of need:

> I've done it [assessed for EAA] as an in-house [specialist assessor], and you think right, I'm going to crack these access arrangements today- somebody comes- "So and so's mum's in reception. Can you deal with that?" And okay, then, just before I go and get somebody, actually. "So and so's had to go home sick. Could you cover?" "There's a phone call for you." And you end up, and at the end of the day, you've done 2 out of the 8 on the list.
>
> (SA_12e)

The limited time participants had to dedicate to EAAs often limited the level of support they could offer. Some participants were able to provide training and instruction for EAAs such as touch typing, while others did not have the capacity to offer this:

> So we don't do touch typing, I don't have the time, and we don't have the time
>
> within the timetable to do that.
>
> (SENCO_14s)

Theme 3: Lack of consistency and a systematic approach

The final theme refers to the piecemeal approach to the identification and provision of EAAs most schools face due to the complexity of the EAA system, perceived lack of official guidance on EAA implementation and a lack of clarity around different roles (e.g. the SA, the SENCO, the teachers). This theme has two subthemes (i) *clarity around roles and responsibilities* and (ii) *training and monitoring*.

Clarity around roles and responsibilities

It was evident from interviews that, within school, there was a lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities of SENCOs, SAs and teachers. Many participants noted that teachers often lacked a clear understanding of EAAs or their role in the process and did not consistently support the identification process by effectively documenting students' needs. This ambiguity around responsibilities led to miscommunication across some schools and led to variation in the level of work SENCOs and SAs completed at different points of the EAA process:

> It's just too big a job, really [EAAs]. And I still don't think their SLTs [senior leadership team] have got their head around the fact that the enormity and the scale and the breadth, the job is just extraordinary. And I also think that a general whole school understanding of access arrangements and staff responsibilities within that—their rights, roles and responsibilities basically within that—system are not clearly understood.
>
> (SA_8e)

> I don't personally track [monitor EAAs] and see whoever is making much of a difference in individual subjects. Again, the teachers would do that to see whether their test scores have improved, or if they are able to answer more or less as a result of those access arrangements, and it's not happened yet that teachers come to me and said 'The student has performed worse after being given access arrangements'. So, I'm just kind of assuming that that it has been beneficial.
>
> (SENCO_2i)

There was also variation in the level of training and qualifications that participants held. In some schools, the SENCO had more extensive training and did the entire application on their own, while in others, an assessor may assess and have more specialised training on EAAs than the SENCO:

> You know, no SENCO is going to have time to sit and read through all of them [the JCQ guidelines]. So, you know, I'm saying to some of them I work with, 'I think rest break might be really beneficial for this student as well', and they're like, 'Oh what's that?' you know. So, they're not even aware of the whole range of support that they can have.
>
> (SA_1e)

Training and monitoring

Finally, it was evident that there was a notable disparity in the extent and efficacy of training provided to pupils to use their EAAs, as well as in the monitoring of EAA effectiveness for each student. This variability was attributed not only to resource limitations but also to inadequate official guidance on the implementation and ongoing training/support to use EAAs effectively. While some schools conducted ad hoc training or used mock exams to allow students to practice, some schools had a compulsory laptop policy in place to offer training. Most participants reported only providing training on touch-typing and very few participants discussed training for other arrangements, such as how to use extra time or the use of assistive technology like reading pens:

> So, we try and explain to them [students] different ways that they can use extra time, so that it's not just seen as extra, but kind of bolted on. But I don't think we do that, it's not obligatory. It's not compulsory. It's something we often do, but not something we always do as part of the standard process
>
> (SENCO_3i)

Some participants described using a monitoring system to track and review the efficacy of EAAs for each student, while others did not have such a system in place. This system was sometimes described vaguely without much of a systematic approach (e.g. through observations in mock exams or through teacher feedback about whether they felt an EAA was working). A common way of tracking the use of extra time was to use a different coloured pen to indicate how much a student was writing with their extra time and how they were using it:

> We go into the end of exams [to observe]. They're asked to change to a green pen. But, as I said, they won't necessarily use it for extra writing. They might be proofreading or checking. So we just might write… '[name of student], flicking through paper and proof reading', or 'went back to question first paper to read again', or 'asleep'. We do on occasion, also, take away extra time, because we can see consistently that they're not using it, or we would certainly have a discussion with them, and they might say to us, 'yeah, I didn't use it in geography, the paper was really short' and we'll go 'okay, yeah, that's a fair point'. There isn't this consistency always across subjects in the way that exams are set. So we follow up with pupils, and on the basis of the observations that we've taken.
>
> (SENCO_3i)

It was evident that there were inconsistencies across participants in the type and the quality of teacher feedback and engagement in monitoring EAA. Some participants had a system in place (e.g. a shared spreadsheet) for collecting teacher feedback and reflected on getting useful feedback to help direct their approach. These participants noted that English teachers were most helpful in providing comprehensive feedback on student's progress and use of EAA. However, other participants lamented the difficulties in collecting teacher feedback citing difficulties with teachers' workloads and lack of knowledge around SpLD and EAA:

> I think the most difficult thing for me is getting information back from as many subject specific teachers as possible. So, it's usually fine getting information back from English teachers, but it's like getting blood from a stone with others.
>
> (SENCO_13s)

Many participants noted that while guidance on identification and assessment of EAA were established, there was more ambiguity around implementation and provision of EAA once they had been awarded. Many participants cited their wish for further guidance and training in this area:

> I think sometimes what will be more helpful is when we do our training every autumn right at the beginning of the academic year is that there's not just new regulations, there's ways to implement them.

<div align="right">(SENCO_1i)</div>

While additional guidance on implementation would be welcomed, implications around availability of staff time and funding for appropriate provision of accommodations would still affect implementation and monitoring.

DISCUSSION

With an increase in SEN and performance gaps in high-stakes examinations seen nationally (DfE, 2024) and internationally (European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education [EASIE], 2021; and the United States, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023), there is a global challenge to reflect on best practices to support students with SEN and reduce assessment inequalities. The present study sought to explore SENCO's and assessor's experiences in identifying need and effectiveness of support available to students with SpLD in England for end of secondary school examinations. The findings presented should be considered in the context of the sample. On the whole, the sample can be described as very experienced in coordinating EEA. It is also noted that although participants covered a range of locations across England, a large proportion of practitioners were based in schools in London. Previous research suggested that SEN professionals find the process of applying for EAAs time-consuming (McGhee & Masterson, 2022; Woods, 2007). The present findings extend the literature to highlight that while SENCOs and assessors in this sample reported striving to reduce barriers to exams for students with SpLD in the fairest possible way, intentions can be impacted by the availability of resources, conflicting agendas of key stakeholders, the lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities and lack of training to use EAA and monitoring their effectiveness once granted. Furthermore, examples were given by practitioners in our sample which demonstrated how the disparate nature of practice often depends on the school type, resources and funding. Four key practical implications can be raised based on the findings.

The first implication relates to the findings of a substantial workload faced by SENCOs and specialist assessors, insufficient resources for some schools and a lack of clear roles and professional development/training in EAAs. These findings align with those of McGhee and Masterson (2022) and Sumner et al. (2025) who reported that SEN professionals found EAAs to be a heavy time burden. This not only impacts the effectiveness of support for students with SpLDs and the possibility that some students may be missed but also affects staff morale and efficiency. Furthermore, linked to this, it was evident that well-resourced independent schools are at an advantage in terms of identifying and providing accommodations (e.g. laptops) for students with SpLDs over less-funded state schools. Variation was noted in the identification stage and in the comprehensiveness of assessments. Some participants in our sample, particularly from independent schools with a bigger SEN team or greater access to external assessors, had capacity to undergo detailed informal assessments, including screeners, reading tests and school-based evaluations. Concerns around equity in EAA provision have been raised previously (McMurray et al., 2018; Ofqual, 2012).

The present study further highlighted how participants working in better resourced schools reported being able to formally assess students exhaustively until they met the JCQ criteria for EAA, while more often than not participants from state schools reported lacking the time and resources for such extensive evaluations. Moreover, state school practitioners in this sample often had to prioritise which students would benefit most from limited resources such as laptops or scribes. However, it is important to note that variation was also observed within the state sector, as one specialist assessor reported being adequately resourced. It is possible that disparities are not solely due to the *amount* of available resources, but rather *how* those resources are deployed and prioritised within individual schools.

To address the first challenge, and with the evidenced increased number of EAAs each year (Ofqual, 2024), it is recommended that senior leaders reflect on the workload of their SEN team. JCQ regulations state that 'the head of centre must ensure that the SENCo has sufficient time to both manage the access arrangements process within the centre and familiarise him/herself with the JCQ publication', in addition to specifying that SENCOs must undertake regular CPD in EAA (JCQ, 2024b, p.8). To protect SENCO time, senior leaders may consider developing a school policy clarifying notational time allocated to this role, which could feasibly be reviewed by the JCQ as part of their inspection process. It has also been recommended (e.g. Hipkiss, 2019) that every centre employs an EAA administrator to help collate and file the paperwork needed for inspection purposes. Furthermore, a review of how resources are being used with effect and given the increase in demand in EAA would be useful.

Second, it was evident that more guidance is needed to ensure consistent assessment practices across schools. Financial constraints lead to variation in SEN provision between and within Local Authorities (Shaw et al., 2016) in addition to the aforementioned differences found between independent and state schools. The SpLD Assessment Standards Committee (SASC) provide a list of tests suitable for use by qualified SpLD assessment practitioners for the purposes of assessment of EAA (SASC, 2024). However, under current guidance, it is up to the individual assessor's discretion which and how many to use. This includes the option to use independent subtests of different assessments rather than a composite score of several subtests, where that advantages the student. However, since subtests have fewer items than composites, there is a greater risk of measurement error, which is problematic when they are used to support eligibility decisions. Where possible, composite scores may be considered to provide strong support of need where possible, although it is recognised that not all tests have a composite score to be calculated. McGhee and Masterson (2022) also discovered from their survey data that SENCOs were using assessments that were out of date or not accepted for use. Further research is needed to establish which assessments best identify students' needs in relation to pinpointing what EAA may be best for them. This information could help mitigate exhaustive assessment practices while ensuring that practitioners with limited time for assessment are using the most accurate measures. This could also help in identifying students sooner in their education, so they have time to practice their EAAs. A further way to address disparity may be to allocate specific funding for under-resourced schools to ensure all students have equal access to assessments and tools to support provision (e.g. laptops, reading pens, etc.).

Third, there is a critical need for training on how best to support students to use their EAAs productively and confidently and to develop systems to monitor effectiveness. Sumner et al. (2025) reported data that suggested SEN professionals lack strategies to train students to use EAAs. Similarly, while participants in the present study made efforts to accurately identify students needing EAAs, there was a significant gap in providing training for students to use these arrangements effectively. Some participants reported that touch-typing was offered at their schools, but this was not a consistent practice. Very few participants stated that they provided any kind of training or regular practice for extra time or other arrangements,

such as using a scribe. Some participants noted they would remove an EAA if a student did not use it in mock exams on the assumption that they did not need it. However, it is possible that, without proper training, students may not use the arrangement simply because they are unfamiliar with how to effectively use it. This gap in training may be due to limited time in the SENCO and assessor role and/or lack of knowledge of next steps. While the JCQ provides extensive guidance on how to identify students for EAAs, there is a notable gap in guidance for support and implementation. Clearer, more detailed official guidelines and ongoing training on the practical implementation of EAAs are needed to reduce variability across schools and improve exam support for students with SpLDs. For instance, whether a touch-typing policy needs to be enacted or workshops given to practice how extra time might be used. SpLDs are heterogenous in nature (e.g. Carroll et al., 2024; Manis & Bailey, 2008; Rapcsak et al., 2009), and thus, students with SpLD may benefit from training programmes that not only target their needs but also leverage their strengths. Further research is required on what works in this respect.

Finally, better communication is needed between the SEN team and parents/caregivers, students and wider teaching staff. On the one hand, the findings highlight the importance of advocacy, suggesting that families with greater awareness and understanding of the system can more effectively secure necessary support for their child. However, this advantage may come at the expense of students whose families are less equipped to advocate for them, thereby exacerbating inequalities within the system. As a result, some students may receive more support, not based on their individual needs, but due to the capacity of their families to navigate the process. This mirrors discussions being had about schools in the USA (Lovett, 2021), whereby more advantaged children are argued to have a greater chance of receiving support due to parental involvement (Calarco, 2018). Parents may view EAAs as an advantage and feel entitled to this support. The same may also be true for teachers who push for EAAs to enable better results. On the other hand, some parents were reported as being opposed to EAAs, perceiving them as a type of stigma. These challenges may be mitigated if early identification (e.g. Years 7 and 8—early secondary school) occurred, avoiding a rush of assessments in Years 9 and 10 (approaching mock and final exams) and enabling more time for students to practise use of EAAs. This might reduce stigma via normalisation but also encourage families to view accommodations as related to need rather than a commodity to be demanded. Similarly, teachers would be able to embed these as 'normal practice' rather than seeking last minute EAAs to boost exam results. Related here is the need to consider pupil voice. Our findings highlighted examples of students choosing not to use EAA due to the stigma of seeming different. Putting EAA in place is intended to support students to access the test and if particular arrangements are not used, efforts could be best spent elsewhere. Lundy (2007) argued that providing pupils with space, voice, an audience and the possibility of influence increases participation; including pupils in decision-making is also in line with SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015). The JCQ (2024b) have published a simplified guide for families which communicates the purpose of EAA and the general steps to assessing needs. Schools may wish to use this and build upon it further to identify information-specific processes to their setting and, importantly, how pupil voice is included in the process.

Linked to the above, a number of participants in our sample also noted concerns about the adequacy of referral systems contingent on contributions from teachers who vary in their level of input. However, it is acknowledged that teachers may also struggle with wider systemic constraints linked to resourcing, insufficient training or heavy workloads. Indeed, other reports suggest that teachers may not understand the purpose of EAAs (e.g. McGhee & Masterson, 2022). Greater awareness of the purpose of EAAs and who may qualify for them is needed. It would be beneficial to develop strategies that ensure greater participation and consistent student performance feedback from all teachers, possibly by integrating more

formalised, routine communication channels. However, implementation will need to take into account teachers' existing workloads and ensure that these channels are integrated into their current responsibilities, rather than adding to them. Parents, teachers and SENCOs express preferences for teacher feedback over standardised assessments to provide evidence of need (Wood & Happé, 2023). To address this challenge, there is a critical need for comprehensive staff training on identification and monitoring of the effectiveness of EAAs and a clearer delineation of responsibilities to be directed by senior leaders. This training should be an integral part of annual staff development to embed the yearly updates provided by the JCQ. Moreover, improving communication channels and feedback processes between teachers and SENCOs could lead to more targeted and effective training/support for students in how to use the granted access arrangements. With proper training and support, teaching assistants (TAs) can be highly effective at supporting students with SEND (Blatchford et al., 2009) and perhaps could be better utilised in a secondary setting to identify need, monitor use of an EAA or deliver training for different EAAs informed by the SEN team. These recommendations would enable SENCOs and assessors to more closely meet the vision of 'levelling the playing field' in respect of exam access.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A range of settings were represented by the sample, providing rich data to allow for a comparison of approaches and consideration of how financial restraints may impact provision around EAAs. Although the intended focus was on students with SpLD, the accounts provided by participants would arguably be applicable to other students seeking support and relevant to schools' capacity to provide accommodations. That said, limitations can also be discussed. The findings should be interpreted with the sample in mind, which was largely based in London schools. There may be regional differences in EAA provision and resourcing that could be usefully explored in future research. Participants who volunteered to interview likely had some degree of interest in SEN or SpLD and it is possible that different perspectives and challenges may have arisen with a sample of practitioners that were less committed to contributing to research. We also acknowledge that the themes derived from the data are borne out of the discussions had and practitioners may have emphasised particular concerns in order to call attention to wider systemic challenges. It is further noted that the JCQ includes access arrangements coordinators (AACs) under the umbrella term of 'SENCO'. While we did not include ACCs in the present sample, it may be interesting for future research to consider their role and experience of dealing with the increase in EAA, as they are employed specifically to coordinate EAA and differ to statutory SENCOs who have a multifaceted role and competing demands. In addition, the study aimed to capture what is happening in practice but neglects the pupil voice by focusing solely on practitioners.

Finally, although there is a recorded increase in the use of EAAs (Ofqual, 2024), there is a lack of empirical data which establishes the effectiveness of such arrangements in timed, written exams. Ofqual reports the number of applications awarded for EAAs each year, but do not report student performance with these arrangements in place. Future research could measure the efficacy of different types of EAAs to determine whether they improve exam outcomes for students and whether the criteria used in practice as evidence for need can accurately identify the students who would benefit most. Research in this area has been explored somewhat in the USA and could be usefully extended to UK samples, as support for school examinations is reportedly similar (e.g. extra time, reader, etc.; e.g. Lovett, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The current study provides insights on SENCOs' and specialist assessors' experiences in identifying need and effectiveness of support available to students with SpLD for written exams. Findings support previous reports, reinforcing that the identification, application process and provision of EAA is a complex and often bureaucratic process. This task is made more difficult by the inconsistencies in referral processes and from pressure from parents and students themselves which, in turn, stem from an overall lack of understanding of EAA. Despite a shared commitment among participants to support students equitably, there was variability in how students were identified and assessed for EAAs, as well as in how they were supported in using these arrangements. While JCQ regulations aim to standardise practices and reduce inequalities across settings, better resourced schools still appear to have an advantage in both identifying students and providing support for EAAs. Additionally, gaps in the current guidance on implementing EAAs were identified, particularly in the areas of student training and monitoring the efficacy of the arrangements. Development of better communication channels, allocated workload time for the EAA role, training for pupils in using EAA, and clearer guidance on identification and assessment and are recommended. Future research should investigate the efficacy of different EAA on exam performance for students with SpLD and should also consider the pupil's perspective to better understand their experiences in being supported with EAA.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT
Ethical approval was obtained from UCL, Institute of Education, Faculty of Education and Society Research Committee. Informed written consent was provided by all participants.

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Endnotes
[i] Note we use the term EAA throughout the paper, which refers to access arrangements and reasonable adjustments. Ofqual (2024) recognises EAA as an umbrella term often used by awarding organisations and schools to include reasonable adjustments.

ii It is worth noting that the JCQ use the term 'SENCo' to refer to the person appointed to coordinate access arrangements and this can include an access arrangements coordinator (AAC) who does not hold the formal SENCO qualification. There is a difference in the roles of an ACC and a SENCO employed in the statutory position as per the Code of Practice (Department for Education [DfE], 2024), with the latter being a strategic and coordinating figure for school-wide SEN provision, not only specific to EAA. The focus in this paper was on the statutory SENCO role.

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