

# Nearly half of children in Wales have additional learning needs, report finds

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A new study has highlighted the prevalence of additional learning needs, formerly known as special educational needs (SEN), among under 16-year-olds in Wales.

The findings come with a policy briefing, calling for a robust review of processes used to recognize such issues and more inclusive learning support for all [children](#) nationally.

The [research and policy reports](#), led by the University of Bristol, found nearly half (47.9%) of children born in 2002/2003 were identified with some form of additional learning needs (ALN) at some point during their schooling. This was shown to have the biggest impact on [academic achievement](#) across all key stages of their education.

Lead author Dr. Cathryn Knight, Senior Lecturer in Psychology of Education at the University of Bristol, said, "Our findings clearly challenge the notion that learning needs only affect a minority of learners. Key common factors increasing the likelihood of being identified with SEN also emerged, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the child's environment and understanding their individual situation to effectively support their learning needs."

Researchers from the University's School of Education and Swansea University analyzed data from more than 200,000 children in Wales, born between 2002 and 2009, to understand the levels of SEN and its impact on academic achievement.

Findings revealed that the earlier the additional needs emerged and were recognized, and the longer their education was spent with these known needs, the less likely they were to meet nationally expected levels of attainment.

Dr. Knight said, "Our research suggests the former SEN system in Wales was unable to effectively support students to mitigate the negative impact of SEN on their grades. This underscores the substantial toll of SEN on academic achievement. To improve academic attainment levels in Wales, it is crucial to prioritize effective support for this very large

group of learners."

Learners having free school meals (FSM) throughout their education were found to be four times more likely to be identified with SEN compared to those not in receipt of free meals. Those born in the most deprived neighborhoods were shown to be even more likely (4.6 times) to be identified with SEN.

The study also showed boys were much (5.5 times) more likely to be identified with SEN than girls. Children with higher school attendance had a lower likelihood of SEN identification and learners born in the summer, so younger in their year group, were three times more likely to be identified with SEN than those born in the autumn.

Dr. Knight said, "This raises concerns about the effectiveness of SEN identification processes, particularly given the unexpectedly high number of learners identified with SEN. It suggests a potential issue of over- or under-identification of certain children."

The main policy recommendations in the report were to prioritize inclusive educational initiatives that recognize and support all children. The substantial impact of SEN on children's grades, raises questions about how children with learning needs can be supported to show progression within the education system. Therefore, consideration of more inclusive assessment practices is recommended. The report also recommends that current methods used to identify learning need to be rigorously reviewed, with a new focus on ensuring accuracy, fairness, and inclusivity.

The [research](#) mirrors similar national findings. Evidence from the Education Policy Institute in England also found a high level (40.7%) of SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) identification. Other [research](#), published in the *British Educational Research Journal*, has also

shown that children with SEND in England are also far less likely to meet expected learning standards than their peers at Key Stage 1.

Dr. Knight said, "We also need longer-term evidence within Wales and across the UK in order to develop a fuller understanding of the challenges. This includes possible systematic issues with how learning needs are recognized and their subsequent impact on attainment."

**More information:** Report: [www.bristol.ac.uk/policybristo...en-attainment-wales/](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/policybristo...en-attainment-wales/)

Provided by University of Bristol

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