

Cover Sheet

For this assessment I have submitted the following:

Component 1: Literature review

Component 2: Methodology

Component 3: Ethical considerations

I acknowledge the use of Copilot to support research and proof reading between 29th April to 17th May 2026.

I used the prompts:

1. Find me articles that explore the rise in children with additional learning needs
2. Find me articles that explore the role of additional learning needs coordinators
3. Please check this essay for spelling and grammatical error
4. Please put these references in alphabetical order

I can confirm that I have not presented AI generated work as my own.

The role of practitioners in identifying and supporting additional learning needs in the Early Years

Literature Review

With Additional Learning Needs (ALN) continuing to rise, early years practice has become a critical period for early identification. Recent evidence from the Welsh Local Government Association (2025) highlights increasing demand for ALN services, alongside growing financial pressures in sustaining early intervention and inclusive practice. Early years professionals are often the first to observe potential developmental delays and emerging needs, placing them in a crucial position to initiate support, in line with the principles of early identification, collaboration and person-centred practice outlined in the Welsh Government (2021) ALN Code.

This literature review draws on international research from Wales, England, Scotland and Australia, therefore, the terms ALN (additional learning needs) and SEND (special educational needs and disability) are used interchangeably, reflecting differing policy frameworks that share common inclusive principles.

Curran (2020) highlights the importance of early identification in early years settings, arguing that staff knowledge, experience and training are central to recognising additional needs; however, the research found that opportunities for training are often limited. The study emphasises “frequent and targeted observations” (p.6) as a key mechanism for identifying emerging needs, alongside holistic understanding and evidence-based tracking. Curran also identifies communication and language as a common area of concern but notes that time pressures and multi-agency demands can result in lower-level needs being overlooked, highlighting a tension between professional responsibility and constraints within the system.

Curran further explores SENCO perspectives, focusing on how practitioners evaluate developmental differences between children and coordinate identification processes. This highlights the importance of staff confidence, teamwork and communication with families and external agencies. However, the study also identifies inconsistency in applying the graduated response, suggesting that identification practices vary significantly between settings despite shared frameworks. These findings

demonstrate that variability in training and practitioner confidence affects consistency in early identification

In contrast, Griggs and Bussard (2017) present identification as a slow and complex process shaped by context, including who raises concerns, family background and the nature of an individual's needs. While they also emphasise observation as central, they extend this by showing how identification often begins informally before becoming formalised through external agency involvement. Their findings highlight the importance of early communication with parents, while also acknowledging that this can be challenging in practice. This suggests that identification is not a linear process but one shaped by both professional judgement and wider and environmental influences.

Griggs and Bussard (2017) also highlight how support is tailored following identification, ranging from predictable routines and targeted interventions to more individualised provision. However, they identify significant barriers, particularly in relation to environmental adaptations for children with more complex needs, which are often limited by funding and resource availability. This suggests that inclusive practice is constrained not only by practitioner awareness but also by wider systemic factors.

Across the literature, observation consistently emerges as a foundation of early identification. However, Curran (2020) draws emphasis to practitioner competence, while Griggs and Bussard (2017) highlight context and relational influences. Together, these findings suggest that identification is not purely a technical skill, but a process shaped by both professional expertise and the wider environment in which practitioners operate.

Clemson and Coyle (2025) shift the focus towards learning environments, exploring how educators co-design and adapt spaces to support pupils with additional learning needs. They highlight environmental factors such as light, noise and colour as important in creating calm, home-like spaces. However, they also note that environments are not always recognised as tools for supporting need, suggesting a limited understanding of sensory and environmental impact, particularly in relation to the emotional climate of the classroom (Welsh Government, 2022). Importantly, they also emphasise the role of relationships in shaping how effectively environments

support pupils, aligning with the Curriculum for Non-Maintained Nursery Settings (2022), which highlights both enabling environments and the role of the adult within a universal approach to provision.

This emphasis on relationships and environmental design links closely to Siraj et al. (2023), who highlight the importance of professional development in shaping practitioner practice. They argue that improved practitioner knowledge enhances adult–child interactions and enables more effective scaffolding within Lev Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (Eun, 2019). Taken together, both studies position the adult as central to inclusive practice, not only in terms of pedagogical interaction but also in shaping the learning environment itself. This highlights that effective inclusion relies on practitioner understanding, which influences both relational practice and the design of enabling environments.

The FEEL study (Fostering Effective Early Learning) (Siraj et al., 2018) is a large-scale cluster randomised controlled trial conducted across early childhood education and care settings in Australia. It provides evidence that professional development programmes can improve pedagogical quality, particularly through enhancing educator–child interactions and intentional teaching practices. This strengthens Siraj et al.’s (2023) argument by demonstrating that improved practitioner knowledge leads to measurable improvements in both teaching quality and children’s learning outcomes.

To further explore how these principles are applied in practice, the following case study, conducted by Little Stars Nursery on behalf of National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) Cymru, demonstrates implementation of the ALN Code through a person-centred, multi-agency approach. Support was characterised by strong collaboration between professionals, with the person-centred practice (PCP) process enabling shared target-setting and ongoing review informed by practitioner observation. This reflects the importance of multi-agency working and holistic understanding identified in the literature.

Practice was underpinned by strong relationships and an inclusive approach, with a communication-rich and enabling environment supporting the child’s development and independence. Staff training evolved in response to need, including the use of

sign-supported communication, which was embedded across the setting, reflecting a universal approach to inclusion.

Overall, the literature and case study highlight that supporting children with Additional Learning Needs is a complex and multi-layered process. Effective practice is not dependent on a single factor, but emerges through the interaction of practitioner knowledge, strong relationships and enabling environments, all of which are shaped by wider systemic and policy contexts.

Across the wider evidence base, there is also a consistent emphasis on the interaction between policy expectations and everyday practice. While frameworks such as the ALN Code set out clear principles for early identification and inclusive support, the literature suggests that implementation is uneven due to variations in training, resources and practitioner confidence. This indicates that effective identification is not only shaped by individual practitioner skill or context, but also by the structural conditions within early years settings that enable or constrain practice.

Methodology

This study will investigate the role of practitioners in identifying and supporting additional learning needs in the early years, using a purposive sample consisting of ALNCOs, Early Years teachers, and teaching staff working within two government-funded nursery settings.

These participants were selected due to their direct involvement in the early identification and support of children with additional learning needs (ALN). This approach reflects Newby's (2014) view that research participants should meaningfully represent the area of practice under investigation to ensure relevant and reliable data. As ALNCOs, Early Years teachers, and teaching staff work closely with children during early development, they are well placed to provide insight into identification processes, inclusive practice, and support strategies within funded nursery settings.

Welsh Government (2022) guidance emphasises inclusive practice and early intervention in early years education, outlining expectations for practitioners to

support children's developmental needs through observation, assessment, and responsive practice. Similarly, the Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales (2021) highlights practitioners' and ALNCOs' responsibilities in identifying needs and coordinating support. This is further underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), particularly Article 3, which states that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all decisions affecting them. This provides an ethical and rights-based rationale for the study, ensuring early identification and support are considered in relation to positive outcomes for children with ALN. As these frameworks underpin practice in funded nursery settings, the perspectives of ALNCOs and Early Years staff are particularly relevant to the aims of this research.

Two government-funded nursery settings with broadly similar demographic and socioeconomic characteristics were selected to provide consistency across the research sample. This allows the study to focus specifically on practitioner experiences of identifying and supporting additional learning needs, rather than on wider socioeconomic factors that may influence rates of identification or access to support.

This study will adopt a mixed-methods approach using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. A mixed-methods design has been selected as it allows the research to capture both breadth and depth of data, providing a more comprehensive understanding of practitioner experiences in identifying and supporting additional learning needs. A larger sample of approximately 15–30 Early Years practitioners, including ALNCOs and teaching staff, will complete questionnaires to provide a broad overview of practitioner experiences across the two nursery settings. This will enable the identification of general patterns in confidence, practice, and perceived challenges related to supporting additional learning needs.

A purposive sample of approximately 4–8 participants will then take part in semi-structured interviews. This smaller sample is appropriate for qualitative exploration, as it allows for more detailed discussion of professional practice and enables participants to elaborate on their experiences in their own words. This stage of the research is intended to provide richer contextual understanding of the issues

identified in the questionnaire data, particularly around decision-making processes, professional judgement, and barriers to effective support.

Triangulation will be used to strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings by comparing data collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. This methodological triangulation allows quantitative trends identified in the questionnaire data to be explored and explained in greater depth through qualitative interview responses. For example, practitioner confidence levels in identifying additional learning needs will be measured using Likert-scale data, while interviews will provide contextual explanations for these levels, such as training, experience, or staffing constraints. By examining whether findings from both methods converge or diverge, the study aims to produce a more comprehensive and credible understanding of practitioner experiences across both settings.

This reflects Denzin's (2012) concept of triangulation within mixed-methods research, which emphasises the use of multiple approaches to address the same research question in order to deepen understanding and enhance the richness and validity of findings. In this sense, triangulation does not simply confirm results, but allows for a more layered interpretation of complex educational experiences, where different forms of data contribute to a fuller picture of practice. This enhanced understanding provides a key justification for the use of a mixed-methods approach in this research, as it ensures that neither numerical trends nor personal accounts are considered in isolation, but instead are used together to strengthen interpretation.

It also aligns with Hammond and Wellington's (2020) view that triangulation involves the use of more than one method of data collection alongside a focus on comparing different datasets to strengthen interpretation and enhance the credibility of findings. By integrating findings from both quantitative and qualitative strands, the research is better able to capture the complexity of practitioner experiences in early years settings, where decision-making is often influenced by a combination of policy expectations, professional judgement, and contextual factors within the classroom environment.

This combination of methods therefore provides both breadth and depth of data, strengthening the overall robustness of the study. It also ensures that findings are

situated within a consistent policy context, underpinned by the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (2018), which establishes a statutory framework for the identification, assessment, and support of children with additional learning needs across Wales

The questionnaire will include Likert-scale and open-ended questions. Waters (2024) highlights the importance of clear structure for first-time researchers. Likert items will identify patterns and allow comparison across settings, while open-ended questions will provide deeper insight into practitioner experiences. This balances breadth and depth, reflecting Newby's (2014) view that mixed methods allow broader coverage without prioritising one approach over another.

Questionnaires are a time-efficient method of collecting data from larger samples with minimal disruption to practice. Newby (2014) highlights their value in producing structured data. They will be available in paper and digital formats, and responses will be anonymised to ensure confidentiality and encourage honest responses.

Initial questions will gather background information such as role and experience. A 7-point Likert scale will then measure practitioner confidence in identifying additional learning needs. This scale provides a wider range of responses, increasing accuracy and sensitivity. Joshi et al. (2015) note that broader scales reduce forced or inaccurate responses, while a neutral midpoint allows for uncertainty. Responses will be converted into quantitative data for analysis.

Example statements will include confidence in identifying early signs of additional learning needs, understanding developmental milestones, and discussing concerns with parents. Additional items will explore barriers such as training and staffing ratios.

Open-ended questions will explore practitioner experiences, including strategies used, parental involvement, successful adjustments, training needs, and key challenges. While this approach provides richer qualitative insight, it is less easily comparable and may limit the identification of patterns across responses.

Cohen and Morrison (2017) emphasise that qualitative research is context-dependent and focuses on participants' subjective meanings. They argue that

behaviour and experiences cannot be fully understood through numerical data alone, as meaning is socially constructed and varies between individuals. This is supported by Harcourt, Perry, and Waller (2011), who draw on both Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner to highlight the importance of social, cultural, and environmental contexts. Together, these perspectives justify the use of open-ended questions in this study, as they allow for the exploration of professional judgement and experience within early years settings.

Accordingly, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a smaller purposive sample of participants due to the time-intensive and in-depth nature of qualitative data collection (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2017). However, a key limitation of this approach is the restricted sample size, as the time required to conduct and analyse interviews limits the number of participants that can be included.

Despite this, semi-structured interviews will enable a more detailed exploration of practitioner experiences of identifying and supporting additional learning needs, as open-ended questions such as “Can you describe an experience where you identified emerging needs in one of your children?” and “Can you explain how you provide a graduated response to children, including universal and targeted support?” allow responses to be clarified and expanded during the interview process.

Semi-structured interviews also provide flexibility within the interview process, enabling the researcher to clarify questions and probe responses where necessary, helping to generate richer qualitative data and reduce the risk of misunderstanding that may occur in questionnaire-based data collection. As discussed by Harcourt (2011), open-ended interviews allow participants to express their own perspectives and experiences in their own terms, enabling unanticipated issues or insights to emerge during the discussion.

However, this flexibility may introduce the potential for bias, as participants may alter their responses due to the Hawthorne effect. Newby (2014) describes this as “the desire to please” (p. 6), which may occur when participants provide responses, they believe the interviewer wants to hear, demonstrating potential interviewer influence. To help minimise this, interviews will be conducted by researchers of differing gender, age, and ethnicity, as recommended by Newby (2014), in an attempt to reduce interviewer and participant response bias.

All interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription, enhance reliability, and allow responses to be revisited during analysis, supporting a more detailed and consistent interpretation of practitioner experiences.

Overall, this methodological approach combines purposive sampling, mixed methods, and triangulation to provide a focused yet comprehensive exploration of practitioner experiences in identifying and supporting additional learning needs. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data within a consistent policy context, the study aims to produce findings that are both sound and reflective of practice in early years settings.

Ethical Considerations

According to British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2024), ethical considerations in educational research are grounded in respect for all individuals involved in or impacted by the study. Researchers are expected to treat participants fairly, with sensitivity and dignity, while recognising and valuing differences such as age, gender, ethnicity, culture, disability, beliefs, and other personal characteristics. Similarly, the British Psychological Society (2021) highlights the importance of the four core principles of respect, competence, responsibility, and integrity within research practice. Together, these approaches promote equality, inclusivity, and freedom from discrimination throughout the research process, while ensuring that research and data collection remain valid, reliable, and ethically sound.

This paper will explore the key ethical considerations involved in interviewing staff and collecting questionnaire data regarding their knowledge and experience of identifying and supporting Additional Learning Needs, alongside the key frameworks, policies, and legislation that underpin ethical educational research practice.

A central ethical requirement in research is informed consent. This is underpinned by the principle of respect within the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021) and is further supported by Miller et al. (2012), who emphasise participant autonomy and transparency in the research process. Participants will be provided with clear information regarding the purpose of the research, enabling them to make an informed decision about whether to take part. They will also be informed

of their right to withdraw at any time, without consequence, and will be updated should any relevant changes occur during the research process. Whilst these procedures are designed to ensure fully informed and voluntary participation, it is acknowledged that in workplace-based research settings, the presence of professional relationships and institutional expectations may still subtly influence decision-making. As such, informed consent in this context is understood not as a single event, but as an ongoing process that requires continual attention to participant understanding and autonomy.

This approach not only ensures ethical compliance, as highlighted by BERA (2024), but may also strengthen the quality of the data collected, as transparency supports participant autonomy and is more likely to encourage honest and accurate responses. However, it is also recognised that transparency alone cannot fully eliminate issues such as social pressure or self-presentation bias, particularly in professional environments where participants may feel an implicit need to present their practice in a favourable light.

Consent will be recorded and securely stored, providing a clear audit trail and ensuring there is no ambiguity regarding participants' understanding and decisions. This aligns with UKRIO (2016) guidance, which emphasises that consent must be clearly evidenced and appropriate to the nature of the research, particularly where clarity of understanding is essential.

The British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021), particularly the principle of integrity, emphasises honesty, accuracy, and unbiased representation in research. A potential challenge relates to participants being drawn from the same setting, where staff may feel an implicit obligation to participate if colleagues are also involved, affecting voluntariness. While measures such as avoiding incentives help to reduce overt pressure, it is acknowledged that such structural influences cannot be entirely removed, only minimised. In addition, because questions relate to children within their setting, participants may be more inclined to present their practice positively, increasing the risk of participants presenting themselves in a favourable light, which is a well-recognised issue in educational research contexts where professional accountability is involved.

In line with principles of ethical educational research (BERA, 2024), the researcher will ensure honesty, clarity, and respect in all interactions, while avoiding deception or misleading information.

All data will be stored securely on password-protected devices and encrypted files, with access restricted to the researcher only. Participant identities will be anonymised using pseudonyms. In accordance with The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Union, 2016) (Article 13), participants will be informed about the purpose of the research, data collection methods, intended use of findings, and their right to withdraw at any stage. This aligns with the University of Wales Trinity Saint David Research Data Management Policy (2025), which emphasises data protection by design and default and requires researchers to consider privacy, confidentiality, security, and access at the planning stage. In line with UK GDPR storage limitation principles (Article 5(1)(e)), personal data will not be retained longer than necessary. Data will therefore be kept for no longer than five years after completion of the study and then securely deleted.

Risks to participants will be minimised through research design, although ethical safeguards do not eliminate all pressures in workplace contexts, where practitioners may still feel an expectation to participate. Participation will be voluntary, with reassurance that there are no right or wrong answers and that responses will not be used to assess performance. Participants may decline to answer questions, take breaks, or withdraw at any time without consequence. While these measures reduce coercion and support autonomy, it is acknowledged that participants may still feel a sense of obligation due to professional culture and organisational relationships. This aligns with NSPCC (2023), which emphasises informed consent and harm minimisation in educational research, and is supported by BERA (2024), which highlights participant burden in a professional context. Efforts will therefore be made to minimise time demands and ensure participation is manageable within working roles.

Although children are not direct participants, the research concerns early identification of Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and is therefore informed by child-centred ethical principles outlined within the ERIC framework (2024) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). In particular, Article 23 of the

UNCRC recognises the rights of children with disabilities and additional needs to receive appropriate support and assistance enabling full participation in education and society. This supports the ethical rationale for exploring practitioners' experiences of ALN identification to contribute to improved early support and inclusion.

Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) (n.d.) further emphasises that researchers must consider whether research extends knowledge and influences practice, whether children need to be directly involved, and whether there are justified reasons for exclusion. However, it is also important to recognise that decisions to exclude children from direct participation, while ethically justified in this context, may limit insight into lived experience, meaning findings are shaped purely from practitioner perspectives.

In this study, data will be collected solely from educational staff rather than children. This was considered appropriate as the research focuses on professional perspectives rather than children's lived experiences, reducing ethical complexity associated with involving potentially vulnerable participants, though this also means the study does not capture the direct voice of children.

The study therefore seeks to balance protection from harm with the wider social value of research aimed at supporting inclusive educational practice, although this balance is inherently complex and requires ongoing ethical judgement rather than fixed solutions.

The research will be conducted in accordance with clear professional boundaries to ensure data collection remains ethical and respectful. Interviews will be conducted sensitively, given the potential for emotional or complex professional discussions relating to additional learning needs identification. The researcher will remain neutral throughout, avoiding leading questions and ensuring participants are not guided towards particular responses. However, it is acknowledged that complete neutrality in qualitative interviewing is difficult to achieve in practice, and the researcher's presence, phrasing, and professional identity may still influence participant responses to some extent. This position is reflected in Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018), who argue that the idea of value-free, neutral and entirely impartial research

is problematic and should instead be replaced by a more conscious and reflective understanding of researcher involvement within the research process.

In line with principles of ethical educational research (BERA, 2024), the researcher will ensure honesty, clarity, and respect, while avoiding deception or misleading information. Consideration will also be given to power imbalances within the research process. Guidance from Ofsted (2026) highlights the importance of recognising and mitigating power differentials between researchers and participants. In educational settings, such imbalances may influence openness and willingness to participate. While the study seeks to minimise this through voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw, it is acknowledged that power dynamics can be reduced but not entirely eliminated, and may continue to shape participant engagement in subtle ways.

Overall, this study has considered a range of ethical issues relevant to conducting research with educational practitioners on the identification and support of Additional Learning Needs (ALN) in the early years. Key considerations have included informed consent, confidentiality, risk minimisation, and the need to manage potential power imbalances within workplace-based research contexts. Throughout, emphasis has been placed on ensuring that participation is voluntary, informed, and free from coercion, while also recognising that ethical safeguards may reduce but not fully remove all contextual pressures experienced by participants. The research therefore requires ongoing reflection and careful attention to both participant experience and researcher conduct throughout the process. This reflects the view within the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021) that ethical guidance does not provide fixed answers to every situation, but instead establishes clear boundaries within which professional judgement must be applied. Ethical decision-making is therefore understood as an ongoing and reflective process, requiring researchers to continually evaluate and respond to emerging ethical considerations throughout the research.

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