

Cover sheet.

For this assignment I have used the following: -

Part 1: Literature Review

Part 2: Methodological Considerations

Part 3: Ethical Considerations

Statement for the use of AI.

I acknowledge the use of Co-pilot between 20.04.26-15.5.26 to research and to proofread.

I used the prompt(s):

- 1.Current Research
2. Welsh Government
3. Proof Reading.

Section 1.

Exploring the Increase in Additional Learning Needs Identification in Wales Over the Last 20–25 Years.

Additional Learning Needs (ALN) has become an increasingly prominent issue within Welsh education over the last two decades. The transition from the Special Educational Needs (SEN) framework to the Additional Learning Needs system under the **Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018** reflects wider changes in educational policy, inclusion, and support for learners. During this period, the number of children and young people identified with ALN has risen significantly across Wales. Researchers, policymakers, and educators continue to debate the reasons behind this increase, with explanations ranging from improved diagnosis and awareness to socioeconomic inequality and mental health concerns. This literature review will critically examine the main factors identified in existing research to explore why ALN identification has increased in Wales over the last 20–25 years.

The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 represented a significant reform of educational support systems in Wales by replacing the SEN framework with a more inclusive and person-centred **ALN model (Welsh Government, 2018)**.

One major explanation presented within the literature is the development of more inclusive educational policies in Wales. The Welsh Government has increasingly promoted inclusive education, encouraging learners with additional needs to remain within mainstream educational settings wherever possible (**Welsh Government, 2021**). **Booth and Ainscow (2016)** argue that inclusive education requires schools to adapt systems and teaching practices to meet diverse learner needs rather than expecting learners to fit traditional educational structures. Similarly, **Florian (2014)** suggests that inclusive practice has expanded professional understanding of learning differences, contributing to broader identification of educational needs within mainstream schools. The introduction of the ALN framework broadened the definition of learning needs and replaced statements of SEN with Individual Development Plans (IDPs). This reform aimed to create a more person-centred and accessible system for learners aged 0–25. According to **Rees and Hutchinson (2020)**, the shift towards inclusion has resulted in schools identifying a wider range of learners who may previously not have met the threshold for formal support under the SEN framework. Therefore, some researchers argue that the increase in ALN numbers reflects changes in policy and identification practices rather than a genuine rise in learning difficulties.

However, the literature also highlights criticism of this interpretation. Some researchers suggest that broadening definitions can lead to over-identification and inconsistency between schools and local authorities. **Riddell and Weedon (2014)** argue that educational systems can sometimes medicalise behavioural or social difficulties by categorising them as learning needs. **Tomlinson (1982)** also argues that educational labels can reflect wider social inequalities and institutional expectations rather than solely individual learning difficulties. From a sociological perspective, **Bourdieu's (1986)** theory of cultural capital suggests that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds may experience

educational disadvantage due to unequal access to social and cultural resources. "This creates debate regarding whether rising ALN statistics accurately represent increasing educational needs or changes in administrative processes. A limitation of current statistical data is that changing definitions and identification practices may reduce consistency over time. Furthermore, inconsistencies in how schools interpret ALN criteria may affect the reliability of national data.

Another significant factor discussed within the literature is increased awareness and diagnosis of neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), ADHD, and dyslexia. Over the last two decades, public understanding of neurodiversity has expanded considerably. The **American Psychiatric Association (2013)** notes that diagnostic criteria for neurodevelopmental conditions have evolved over time, increasing recognition of autism spectrum disorder and ADHD within educational and clinical settings. Training for teachers and educational professionals has improved, allowing earlier identification of learning difficulties within schools. Research by the **Nuffield Foundation (2024)** found that enhanced awareness among professionals and parents has contributed to more children being referred for assessment and support. Increased recognition of autism has been linked to rising ALN figures throughout the UK, including Wales.

In addition, advances in medical and psychological assessment have enabled children to receive diagnoses that may previously have been overlooked. This is particularly relevant for girls and learners with less visible difficulties, who historically experienced underdiagnosis. Nevertheless, some researchers question whether diagnostic expansion has widened too far. **Timimi (2018)** argues that increasing reliance on diagnostic labels risks pathologizing normal variations in behaviour and learning. Therefore, while improved awareness may support earlier intervention and inclusion, critics argue that it may also contribute to inflated identification rates.

Mental health and emotional wellbeing have also emerged as central themes within recent literature surrounding ALN. Studies suggest that increasing numbers of children and young people experience anxiety, depression, trauma, and emotional behavioural difficulties, all of which can impact educational attainment. **The Children's Commissioner for Wales (2023)** reported growing concerns regarding learner wellbeing, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. **The World Health Organization (2022)** identifies child and adolescent mental health as a growing international concern, highlighting increasing levels of anxiety, emotional distress, and behavioural difficulties among young people. Researchers argue that schools increasingly identify emotional and mental health difficulties under the ALN framework because these issues create barriers to learning.

The relationship between mental health and ALN is complex. Some authors argue that wider societal pressures, including social media use, family instability, and academic stress, have contributed to declining wellbeing among young people (**Evans et al., 2022**). Others emphasise that reductions in access to specialist mental health services place greater pressure on schools to provide support. Consequently, schools may identify learners as having ALN to secure resources and intervention. However, there remains debate regarding whether emotional difficulties should always be categorised

within educational need frameworks, highlighting ongoing tensions between medical, psychological, and educational perspectives.

Socioeconomic inequality is another key factor consistently identified within the literature. Wales continues to experience elevated levels of child poverty in some communities, and numerous studies demonstrate a relationship between deprivation and ALN identification. Learners eligible for free school meals are statistically more likely to be identified with ALN than their peers (**StatsWales, 2024**). While some researchers argue that poverty directly affects cognitive and emotional development, others suggest that educational systems may disproportionately identify disadvantaged learners due to institutional and behavioural pressures within schools. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), including neglect, domestic violence, and housing insecurity, are also associated with increased educational difficulties.

However, the literature presents differing interpretations of this relationship. Some researchers argue that poverty contributes directly to learning difficulties through environmental and developmental factors. Others suggest that disadvantaged children are more likely to be labelled with ALN because schools in deprived areas face greater behavioural and attainment challenges. This raises concerns regarding potential social bias within identification systems. As **Tomlinson (2017)** argues, educational labels may sometimes reflect wider inequalities rather than solely individual learning difficulties. Consequently, socioeconomic disadvantage remains a significant but contested explanation for rising ALN identification.

The literature also identifies pressures within the education system itself as contributing factors. Mainstream schools now educate increasingly diverse learner populations while simultaneously facing financial and staffing pressures. Research suggests that teachers experience growing challenges managing complex classrooms with limited resources (**Rees and Hutchinson, 2020**). Some scholars argue that schools may identify learners with ALN to access additional funding or specialist support services. At the same time, reductions in specialist educational provision have placed greater responsibility on mainstream settings to support learners with a wide range of needs.

Despite extensive research into ALN, several limitations remain within the literature. Much of the available evidence relies heavily on government statistical data, which may be influenced by changing definitions and reporting methods. There is also limited longitudinal Welsh-specific research examining how social changes, policy reform, and mental health trends interact over time. Additionally, learner and teacher perspectives are often underrepresented within academic studies. More research is needed to explore the lived experiences of those directly affected by ALN policies and identification processes.

In conclusion, the literature suggests that the increase in ALN identification in Wales over the last 20–25 years cannot be explained by a single factor. Instead, rising numbers appear to result from a combination of policy reform, improved awareness and diagnosis, increasing mental health concerns, socioeconomic inequality, and pressures within inclusive educational systems. While some researchers view these increases as evidence of improved recognition and support for learners,

others argue that broader definitions and social inequalities may contribute to over-identification. Overall, the evidence demonstrates that ALN is a complex and multi-dimensional issue shaped by educational, social, and political factors.

Section 2.

Methodological Considerations

This research project aims to investigate why the identification of Additional Learning Needs (ALN) has increased in Wales over the last 20–25 years. To explore this topic effectively, careful consideration must be given to the methodology used within the study. Research methodology refers to the overall approach used to collect and analyse data (**Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018**). The methodological choices made for this study were influenced by the nature of the research question, the type of information required, ethical considerations, and practical limitations. This section will discuss the chosen sample, the selected methods of data collection, the justification for these methods, their limitations, the reasons alternative methods were not selected, and the use of triangulation within the research design. A mixed-methods approach would be used for this research project. Mixed-methods research combines both quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a broader understanding of a research issue (**Bryman, 2016**). **Creswell and Creswell (2018)** argue that mixed-methods research provides a more comprehensive understanding of complex social issues by combining numerical trends with detailed participant experiences. This approach was selected because the topic of increasing ALN identification involves both measurable trends and individual experiences. Quantitative methods are useful for finding patterns and trends, while qualitative methods offer more detailed insight into participants' opinions and experiences.

The rise in ALN identification in Wales is influenced by a range of social, educational, political, and psychological factors. Therefore, relying on only one form of data collection may limit the depth and reliability of findings. Using a mixed-methods approach allows statistical information and professional experiences to complement one another, providing a more balanced understanding of the issue.

The chosen sample for this study would consist of educational professionals working within Welsh primary and secondary schools. Participants would include teachers, Additional Learning Needs Coordinators (ALNCOs), and teaching assistants. These professionals were selected because they are directly involved in finding, supporting, and referring learners with ALN within educational settings. Their experiences and observations are highly relevant to understanding why ALN identification may have increased over time.

Purposive sampling would be used to recruit participants. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on their knowledge, experience, or relevance to the research topic (**Bell, 2014**). This sampling method was chosen because the research requires participants who have professional understanding of ALN processes and educational policy within Wales. Random sampling would not guarantee that participants possess the specialist knowledge required for the study.

The sample would ideally include participants from a range of schools across Wales, including urban, rural, English-medium, and Welsh-medium schools. Including professionals from different educational contexts would improve the representativeness of the study and provide a wider range of perspectives regarding ALN identification.

However, there are limitations associated with the chosen sample. Firstly, the sample size may be small due to time and access restrictions. A smaller sample may reduce the generalisability of findings across all Welsh schools. Secondly, participants' views may be influenced by individual school policies, local authority practices, or personal beliefs regarding ALN. Therefore, findings may reflect subjective experiences rather than universal trends.

Another potential issue is volunteer bias. Educational professionals who choose to participate may have stronger opinions or greater interest in ALN compared to those who decline participation. This could influence the balance of perspectives represented within the study.

The primary methods of data collection would be questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. These methods were selected because they allow both quantitative and qualitative data to be collected efficiently.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires would be distributed to educational professionals to gather quantitative data regarding perceptions of increasing ALN identification. Questions would focus on themes identified within the literature review, including:

- awareness and diagnosis of neurodevelopmental conditions,
- mental health concerns,
- policy changes,
- inclusion practices,
- socioeconomic factors,
- and school pressures.

Closed questions and Likert-scale responses would be used to identify patterns and trends across participants' responses. Questionnaires are beneficial because they allow researchers to collect data from multiple participants within a brief period (**Denscombe, 2017**). They are also cost-effective and easier to analyse statistically.

An additional strength of questionnaires is anonymity. Participants may feel more comfortable expressing honest opinions about educational policy and school pressures when responses are anonymous. This may reduce social desirability bias and encourage more truthful responses.

However, questionnaires also present several limitations. Responses may lack depth and detail, particularly when using closed questions. Participants may misinterpret questions or provide limited answers that fail to fully explain their views. Furthermore, questionnaires rely on self-reported data, meaning responses may be influenced by personal bias or selective memory.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews would also be used to gather qualitative data from a smaller group of participants. Interviews allow researchers to explore participants' experiences, beliefs, and opinions in greater depth. Semi-structured interviews involve a flexible set of open-ended questions that allow discussion to develop naturally while remaining focused on the research topic **(Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018)**. **Kvale and Brinkmann (2015)** suggest that semi-structured interviews are particularly effective when researchers aim to explore participants lived experiences and professional perspectives in depth.

This method was selected because the reasons behind increasing ALN identification are complex and may not be fully understood through quantitative data alone. Interviews provide opportunities for participants to explain how policy changes, classroom experiences, mental health concerns, and inclusion practices have affected ALN identification within their schools.

Semi-structured interviews also allow the researcher to ask follow-up questions and clarify responses where necessary. This flexibility improves the richness and depth of the data collected.

Despite these strengths, interviews also have limitations. They can be time-consuming to conduct and analyse, particularly when transcribing responses. Researcher bias may also influence interpretation of participants' answers during analysis. Additionally, some participants may feel uncomfortable discussing sensitive issues such as school funding pressures or concerns regarding over-identification of ALN.

The chosen methods were selected because they complement one another effectively.

Questionnaires provide broad quantitative data regarding general trends and perceptions, while interviews provide more detailed qualitative insight into professional experiences.

Using both methods increases the validity of the research because findings can be compared across different forms of data. For example, if questionnaire results indicate that educational professionals believe mental health concerns contribute significantly to rising ALN identification, interview responses can provide detailed explanations supporting this view.

A mixed-methods approach was considered the most appropriate methodology because the research topic involves both statistical trends and human experiences. Relying solely on quantitative methods would risk oversimplifying the issue, while relying only on qualitative methods may limit the ability to identify wider patterns.

Several alternative methods were considered but rejected due to practical, ethical, and methodological limitations.

Classroom observation was considered as a method. Observation allows researchers to examine behaviour and interactions within natural educational settings. However, this method was rejected because it would not directly address the historical and policy-related aspects of increasing ALN identification. Observing current classroom practice would provide limited insight into long-term changes over the last 20–25 years.

Additionally, observation involving learners with ALN raises significant ethical concerns. Many learners with ALN may be considered vulnerable participants, requiring strict safeguarding and confidentiality procedures. Observation may also alter participant behaviour, reducing the authenticity of findings.

Focus groups were also considered but not selected. Although focus groups can encourage discussion and generate multiple perspectives, participants may feel uncomfortable expressing critical opinions regarding educational policy or school practices in front of colleagues. This could reduce honesty and create conformity within responses.

Focus groups may also be difficult to organise due to teachers' schedules and workload pressures. Therefore, individual interviews were considered more practical and appropriate for discussing potentially sensitive issues.

Using only statistical analysis and surveys was rejected because it would not provide sufficient depth regarding participants' experiences and opinions. Statistical data can demonstrate trends but cannot fully explain why educational professionals believe ALN identification has increased.

Similarly, using only qualitative interviews was also considered insufficient because findings from small participant groups may not reflect wider educational trends across Wales. Therefore, combining both approaches was viewed as more balanced and dependable.

Interview data could be analysed using thematic analysis, which **Braun and Clarke (2021)** describe as a flexible method for identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data.

Triangulation would be used within this research project to improve the reliability and validity of findings. Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods, data sources, or perspectives to investigate the same research topic (**Denzin, 1978**). The purpose of triangulation is to cross-check findings and reduce the limitations associated with relying on a single method.

This study would use methodological triangulation by combining questionnaires, interviews, and secondary statistical data from sources such as StatsWales and Welsh Government reports. For example, if questionnaire data indicated that increased awareness of autism has contributed to rising ALN identification, interview responses and government statistics could be used to support or challenge this finding.

Triangulation strengthens the credibility of research because findings supported by multiple sources are considered more dependable. It also allows the researcher to identify inconsistencies or contradictions between different forms of evidence. This is particularly important when researching complex educational issues such as ALN, where social, political, and psychological factors interact.

However, triangulation can also increase the complexity of research analysis. Combining diverse types of data requires careful interpretation and may be time-consuming. Despite this limitation, triangulation remains beneficial because it improves the overall trustworthiness of the study.

Overall, the chosen methodology aims to provide a balanced and detailed investigation into why ALN identification has increased in Wales over the last 20–25 years. A mixed-methods approach

combining questionnaires and semi-structured interviews was selected because it allows both quantitative trends and qualitative experiences to be explored. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate due to the specialist knowledge required from educational professionals. Although limitations relating to sample size, participant bias, and researcher interpretation exist, the use of triangulation strengthens the reliability and validity of the research. The selected methodology therefore provides an appropriate framework for examining the complex educational and social factors contributing to increasing ALN identification in Wales.

Section 3.

Ethical Considerations.

Ethical considerations are an essential aspect of educational research, particularly when research involves professionals discussing vulnerable groups such as children and young people with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). Ethical research ensures that participants are treated with dignity and respect while protecting their wellbeing, privacy, and rights throughout the research process (BERA, 2018). Although this proposed study would focus on educational professionals rather than directly involving learners with ALN, ethical issues remain incredibly important due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential impact on schools, staff, and learners.

This study would follow the ethical principles outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, protection from harm, and academic integrity. Ethical considerations would also align with the **British Psychological Society's (2021)** Code of Human Research Ethics, particularly regarding confidentiality, informed consent, and protection from harm.

Informed Consent

One of the most important ethical considerations within this research is informed consent. Participants must fully understand the purpose of the research, what participation involves, and how the information collected will be used. Educational professionals participating in questionnaires or interviews would therefore receive an information sheet outlining:

- the aims of the study,
- the methods of data collection,
- the voluntary nature of participation,
- confidentiality procedures,
- and their right to withdraw at any stage.

Participants would then be asked to provide written consent before taking part in the study. This ensures that participation is based on informed and voluntary agreement rather than pressure or obligation.

Informed consent is particularly important within educational settings because teachers and school staff may feel professional pressure to participate if approached through their workplace. Therefore, it would be essential to emphasise that participation is entirely voluntary and unrelated to employment or professional evaluation.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity are also significant ethical considerations within this research. Participants may discuss sensitive topics relating to school policies, ALN identification practices,

funding pressures, or concerns regarding over-identification. If confidentiality is not maintained, participants may fear professional consequences or criticism from colleagues and management.

To protect participants, all questionnaire and interview responses would remain confidential. Participants' names, schools, and local authorities would not be identified within the final research project. Instead, pseudonyms or participant codes would be used during data analysis and reporting. Any identifying information would be removed from interview transcripts to ensure anonymity.

Data collected during the research would also be securely stored in password-protected digital files accessible only to the researcher. This follows data protection principles outlined within the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and university ethical guidelines.

Maintaining confidentiality is particularly important because educational professionals may provide critical opinions regarding educational policy, school resources, or ALN systems. Ensuring anonymity may encourage participants to provide more honest and accurate responses.

Protection from Harm

Researchers have an ethical responsibility to minimise the risk of psychological, emotional, or professional harm to participants. Although this study does not directly involve children or vulnerable learners, discussing ALN may still create discomfort for educational professionals. Participants may feel anxious discussing issues such as insufficient school resources, mental health concerns among learners, or pressures surrounding diagnosis and inclusion.

To minimise potential harm, interview questions would be designed sensitively and professionally. Participants would not be pressured to answer questions they feel uncomfortable discussing, and they would have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without explanation.

The researcher must also remain aware that discussions surrounding ALN can involve sensitive opinions regarding labelling, inclusion, and educational inequalities. Care would therefore be taken to avoid language that could stigmatise learners with ALN or portray educational professionals negatively.

Ethical Issues Relating to Vulnerable Groups

Although learners with ALN would not directly participate in this study, the research topic itself concerns a vulnerable group. Ethical consideration must therefore be given to how learners with ALN are represented within the research.

Researchers must avoid reinforcing stereotypes or deficit-based perspectives regarding disability and learning difficulties. The study should recognise that ALN is influenced by social, educational, and environmental factors rather than viewing learners solely through a medical or diagnostic lens.

Additionally, ethical concerns exist regarding the use of labels within education. Some researchers argue that increasing diagnosis and identification may unintentionally stigmatise learners or negatively affect self-esteem and educational expectations (Tomlinson, 2017). The research must therefore

discuss ALN respectfully and critically while recognising the complexity of educational identification systems.

Avoiding Researcher Bias

Researcher bias represents another important ethical consideration. Bias occurs when researchers' personal beliefs, experiences, or expectations influence the collection or interpretation of data. Due to the debates surrounding ALN identification, there is a risk that researchers may consciously or unconsciously favour explanations, such as over-diagnosis, policy failure, or socioeconomic inequality.

To reduce bias, the researcher would aim to remain objective throughout the study by using consistent interview questions, accurately representing participants' responses, and comparing findings with existing literature. Triangulation would also help reduce bias by allowing data from questionnaires, interviews, and statistical sources to be cross-checked.

Reflexivity would also be important within this study. Reflexivity involves researchers critically reflecting on how their own beliefs, experiences, and assumptions may influence the research process (**Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018**). By recognising potential bias, researchers can improve the credibility and fairness of the study.

Data Protection and Storage

Ethical research must ensure that participants' personal data is stored securely and used appropriately. All digital recordings, transcripts, and questionnaire responses would therefore be stored securely using password-protected devices and encrypted files. Physical documents would be kept in locked storage.

Data would only be used for the purposes of this research project and would not be shared with unauthorised individuals. In accordance with university ethical guidelines and GDPR regulations, data would be destroyed after a specified retention period.

Participants would also be informed about how their data will be used and stored before agreeing to participate in the study.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is another essential ethical consideration within this research project. The researcher has a responsibility to accurately represent existing literature, avoid plagiarism, and reference all sources appropriately using Harvard referencing. Misrepresenting findings or selectively using evidence to support predetermined arguments would undermine the credibility and ethical validity of the research.

This study would therefore aim to critically analyse a range of perspectives regarding ALN rather than presenting only one viewpoint. Maintaining honesty and transparency throughout the research process is essential for producing trustworthy academic work.

Conclusion

Overall, ethical considerations are incredibly important within research exploring Additional Learning Needs in Wales. Although the proposed study would involve educational professionals rather than learners directly, issues relating to confidentiality, informed consent, protection from harm, anonymity, and data protection remain essential. The research must also carefully consider how learners with ALN are represented to avoid stigma or discriminatory assumptions. By following BERA ethical guidelines, maintaining academic integrity, and using ethical research practices throughout the study, the research aims to ensure that participants are treated respectfully and that findings are dependable and ethically sound.

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