

# Dyslexia diagnosis helps wealthier pupils get ahead

Daniel Sanderson

Middle-class parents are paying to have their children labelled dyslexic so they get extra time in exams and lower entry requirements for university, a leading expert has suggested.

Sheila Riddell said that she had identified a “suspicious” pattern in which children from affluent families were more likely to be diagnosed with dyslexia than those living in poverty.

The University of Edinburgh academic, who leads the centre for research in education inclusion and diversity, told Holyrood’s education committee about “very concerning” findings that also showed children from wealthy families were far more likely to receive intensive support at school if

they were identified as having additional support needs.

Figures released last month by the Scottish Children’s Services Coalition revealed that a quarter of schoolchildren in Scotland now required extra support amid a surge in diagnoses such as dyslexia and autism. Over the past four years, the number of pupils diagnosed with dyslexia rose by about 5,000 cases to 18,428.

Although definitions and recording practices are different across the country, a child in affluent East Renfrewshire, known for high standards of state education, is 14 times more likely to be diagnosed with dyslexia than a pupil in generally deprived North Lanarkshire.

Professor Riddell said: “I do think we should be very suspicious when we find

this pattern of social advantage or disadvantage being associated with categories. Of course, being identified as having dyslexia carries advantages with it. You can get more time in exams, you can get, possibly, lower grades for getting into university and then additional time there as well. So it’s not surprising that middle-class parents may seek out this label and pay for private assessments.”

A recent survey of more than 800 primary and secondary school teachers in England found 57 per cent of tutors believed there was a misdiagnosis of special educational needs, including

dyslexia, among children.

Just over half (54 per cent) said “pressure from parents” had led to some youngsters at their schools being cate-

gorised unnecessarily. Almost 40 per cent thought parents wanted a label to help their child gain a “competitive advantage” during tests.

According to the British Dyslexia Association, the cost of a private assessment with an educational psychologist lasting up to three hours costs more than £700. However, children diagnosed with special educational needs can be granted 25 per cent extra time in their exams and supervised rest breaks. The benefits continue when school leavers progress into higher education.

Professor Riddell’s evidence follows hundreds of submissions to the committee from parents, teachers and unions, which suggest that Scotland’s schools are struggling to provide appropriate levels of support for students

with extra needs. Overall, the number of students classed as having additional support needs has risen by 73 per cent in five years, while specialist teachers trained to help them fell by 500 between 2009 and last year.

The committee was told that cut-backs to education budgets had led to support staff being drastically scaled back in recent years. A support teacher in Glasgow said that in-depth training used to be provided to school staff by professional psychologists and therapists. However, she gave an example of a school support worker being told to watch the hit US comedy series *The Big Bang Theory* to help understand how to care for a child with Asperger’s syndrome, as one of the main characters displays symptoms of the condition.

