

# More help for richer pupils

**ANDREW DENHOLM**  
EDUCATION CORRESPONDENT

MIDDLE-CLASS pupils are more likely to get better support for their special needs than those from poorer backgrounds, academics have warned.

A study by Professor Sheila Riddell, from Edinburgh University, also suggests schools are allowing the imbalance to occur because they are more likely to be influenced by professional parents.

But the report shows pupils from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to be identified as having additional support needs such as mental, social and emotional difficulties or conditions such as autism.

A briefing paper says: "Middle-class parents may be able to engage more actively... enabling them to secure better support for their children and challenge local authority decisions."

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# Middle-class special needs children given more support

## Professional parents better placed to push for help than poorer ones

**ANDREW DENHOLM**  
EDUCATION CORRESPONDENT

MIDDLE-class parents who have offspring with special needs are using their professional connections and financial clout to secure better support than is given to children from poorer backgrounds, academics have warned.

A study by Professor Sheila Riddell, from Edinburgh University, also suggests schools are allowing the imbalance to occur because they are more likely to be influenced by professional parents.

The report shows pupils from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to be identified as

having additional support needs (ASN) such as mental, social and emotional difficulties or conditions such as autism.

In 2015, more than 28 per cent of disadvantaged pupils had ASN compared to 16 per cent from the richest backgrounds.

However, poorer families are less likely to have been given a Co-ordinated Support Plan (CSP) – a legal document which means councils must make sure the pupil receives the appropriate support.

Just 1.3 per cent of pupils from the most deprived areas had a CSP compared to two per cent from the least deprived.

Mr Riddell suggested this was because middle-class parents had the resources and resilience to pursue a CSP even when councils were resistant.

A briefing on the issue prepared for the Local Democracy Think Tank states: "Middle-class parents

may be able to engage more actively with educational professionals enabling them to secure better support for their children and challenge local authority decisions.

"Children with less assertive parents, often from less advantaged backgrounds, may have their difficulties ignored and parents may lack the social and economic resources to secure the type of legal redress associated with a CSP."

Ms Riddell explored the issue further in a separate paper, highlighting a number of case studies of parents' experiences.

She stated: "Middle-class parents benefited from their ability to adopt the same cultural register as professionals and to deploy professional friends and associates to support their efforts.

"Parents from poorer backgrounds... lacked the social and cultural capital to engage with professionals on equal terms and their anger was often interpreted as aggression."

Figures released last month by the Scottish Children's Services Coalition revealed that one-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 is 14 times more likely to be diagnosed with dyslexia than a pupil in generally deprived North Lanarkshire.

In evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Education Committee earlier this month Ms Riddell suggested middle-class parents are paying to have their children labelled dyslexic so they get extra time in exams and lower entry requirements for university.

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.

Children diagnosed with special educational needs can be granted 25 per cent extra time in exams and supervised rest breaks. The benefits continue when school leavers progress into higher education.

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.

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**SHEILA RIDDELL: Parents from poorer areas missing out.**



# The Herald

FOUNDED ON MONDAY JANUARY 27, 1783

## Equality trap at heart of Scotland's schools

**I**T IS a dispiriting fact that children with additional support needs (ASN) are more likely to come from lower income families. It is, in effect, a disadvantage piled on a disadvantage and yet it has to be asked whether we are doing enough to help the children who fall into this category.

It does not help that at precisely the time the number of pupils with ASN has increased, the number of additional support teachers in Scotland has fallen. But what can make the situation even worse is when the scarce resources are unevenly distributed.

And yet this would appear to be what is happening with the system that identifies pupils who have ASN, which can include mental, social and emotional difficulties, as well as conditions such as autism. According to a study at Edinburgh University, middle-class parents are likely to secure better support for their children than parents from poorer backgrounds because they have better resources or resilience or have professional connections they can exploit. The report also suggests staff may be more likely to listen to a persistent middle-class parent.

Obviously, the study cannot explain the experiences and behaviour of every parent or teacher, but the disparity the study identifies is not new – part of the

reason for the differences in state schools is the ability of some middle-class parents to find the best school for their child, even if that means moving to an expensive area.

But the fact poorer families appear to be less likely to be given a co-ordinated support plan – the document that means councils must ensure the pupil receives support – is worrying.

Possible misdiagnosis of ASN may well need investigation. But in the meantime, supporting all children with ASN equally is vital to close the educational attainment gap.

What that means in practice is intervention as early as possible but it also means providing the resources that are needed. Anything else runs the risk of deepening, rather than tackling, a disadvantage that affects thousands of children in Scotland.

