

# What do young people think about their labels of literacy difficulty?

## The relationship between label views, self-concept and attributional style

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### Background

Labelling is recognised as both empowering and problematic (Solvag, 2007) and the utility and validity of labels, including dyslexia, has been subject to debate (Elliot & Grigorenko, 2014). Extant research appears to have neglected young people's involvement to gain their views.

Young people with dyslexia tend to make less adaptive attributions (Frederickson & Jacobs, 2001; Humphrey & Mullins, 2002) and experience lower self-concept in relation to academic domains (Novita, 2016; Terras et al., 2009) compared to typically developing peers.

Research suggests that a label can influence the way a young person sees themselves (Taylor et al., 2009). As yet, no research has explored the extent to which a young person's view of their label may influence their self-concept and attributional style. In addition, previous studies have not included young people with more informal labels of literacy difficulty as is prevalent in current educational contexts.

### Research questions

- 1) Do a group of young people aged 11-15 with literacy difficulty labels in mainstream secondary schools have maladaptive attributional styles?
- 2) Do they have low academic self-concept?
- 3) a) Do they have positive or negative views of their labels of literacy difficulty?  
b) How do they describe their views of and experiences with labels?
- 4) Are label views positively associated with attributional style and self-concept?

### Methods

Explanatory sequential mixed methods design consisting of a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase.

51 young people aged 11-15 attending 5 mainstream secondary schools in one Local Authority completed questionnaires online. All young people had a label of literacy difficulty as recorded by their school. Based on their scores on the label views scale, a selection of young people were then invited to participate in follow up interviews. 3 high scorers and 3 low scorers were interviewed.

#### Measures

RQ 1: **Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire Revised** (Kaslow & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991)

RQ 2: **Self-Perception Profile for Children** (Harter, 2012)

RQ 3a: **Label views scale** - developed based on literature on labelling. Presents a vignette followed by statements about labels to which students indicate level of agreement

RQ 3b: **Semi-structured interview guide** – included video prompts, discussion of awareness/reaction/accommodation/identification experiences (Sheffield, 2015) and phase 1 results

**Diagnosis:** It would be much easier to say 'you find it difficult at this and we're gonna do this to help you', not just like 'oh you have this'

**Individual perspectives:** Literacy difficulties is making it known that you have difficulties... Saying you have a problem isn't nice

**Individual perspectives:** You should be known if you're dyslexic so that people can help you

**Impact on self:** They've been labelled, they think 'I can't do this, I can't do that'

**Agency:** Even if I wasn't [dyslexic] I thought it would be easier to call me that just so I can get some help... I think if I didn't have the name I wouldn't have got help

**Agency:** If you have a new teacher and they're like 'why are you finding this so hard' you could say 'oh I have this'

**Peer influence:** Sometimes they'll take the - they make fun of you because of it

**School response:** Not many of my teachers show it's important or anything

**School response:** I'm wanting support but not to the extent where others really know about it cos I don't want people to treat me differently... [Teachers] may try and help me more and I don't feel I need that help at times...

### Results

**RQ 1:** The mean score for attributional style is in the positive direction, indicating the sample did not report maladaptive attributions. However, the score was lower than the norm sample, suggesting less adaptive styles than general population.

**RQ 2:** Young people reported least perceived competence in their academic abilities. Their academic self-concept was significantly lower than their global self-concept ( $t(50)=6.11, p<.001$ ) and the academic self-concept scores of the norm sample.

**RQ 3a:** The mean label views score indicates favourable views towards labels. Participants reported most agreement that a label helps teachers to teach better and that doing well at school is still possible with hard work.

**RQ 4:** Significant correlations were found between attributional style and label views ( $r=.31, n=51, p=.03$ ) and global self-worth and label views ( $r=.45, n=51, p=.01$ ) alongside a number of other subscales.

**RQ 3b:** Thematic analysis identified 6 themes: **diagnosis; individual perspectives; impact on self; agency; peer influence; school response.**

Participants' descriptions of their experiences supported quantitative findings. 'Dyslexia' was the favoured terminology. While young people reported negative aspects to labels, such as concerns about appearing different and being teased or bullied, most participants found their label helpful in increasing their self-understanding, gaining support, and being able to explain their difficulties to others (e.g. peers and teachers). This appeared to have a positive influence on their self-esteem.

### Implications for practice

- Role of attribution re-training and academic self-concept interventions
- Identification process – supporting those involved to give adequate information alongside a positive framing of any label and encouraging adaptive attitudes
- Asking young people about their views and checking with them how they would like their needs to be described (e.g. in reports)
- An individualised approach to support in the classroom targeting the student's needs and preferences not the label
- Labels - remove, reinforce, reframe (Norman, 2017)? Balancing the views of the child (e.g. perceived benefits of a label) with evidence around their validity - acknowledging that for some, a label is helpful and valued, while using them only with care and necessity in the certainty that they would prove empowering to the young person and important to their identity development (Hodge, 2016)