

A Study on Children's Beliefs About Learning Difficulties

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What did we study?

We looked at what children believe about the causes of learning difficulties. By knowing about children's beliefs, we can help them to understand the social, emotional, and academic challenges faced by classmates who find learning difficult.

What did the students do?

Students in grades 5 and 6 participated in interviews at their school. We asked, "Why do some children have learning difficulties?" and students told us what they believed to be the causes. Next we printed their responses onto cards and the students helped make sense of the data by sorting the cards into groups. Finally we used a concept mapping approach to analyze the way the children sorted the cards, and to determine the main findings.

We are excited to share these study results and wish to thank all who participated and made this research possible. Thanks also to SSHRC via Research Western for funding towards this research. The full report by Elizabeth Nowicki, Jason Brown and Magdalena Stepien has been published in the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 2014, Volume 8 (1), under the title *Children's Structured Conceptualizations of Their Beliefs on the Causes of Learning Difficulties*.

What did we find?

Students were reasonably well informed about the causes and factors associated with learning difficulties and they were able to recognize the diverse origins of such difficulties. Our analysis showed that children identified five main factors associated with learning difficulties. The factors are listed below, with an example of what students said in italics.

- **Fate:** *"It's just the way the world is."*
- **Family stress:** *"There is something more important going on at home."*
- **Brain and developmental problems:** *"Because their brains aren't able to function as well."*
- **Information processing difficulties:** *"Their minds can't process all of the answers."*
- **Issues related to motivation and instruction:** *"Some people learn faster than others."*

What's next?

When children understand the factors associated with learning difficulties they are better equipped to include children with disabilities into their social groups at school. Although students in our study were somewhat knowledgeable, we can do more to explicitly teach children about the likely origins and characteristics of learning difficulties.