

The barrier of negative thinking: comparing cognitive errors and attributional style in weak and able readers.

The impact of pupil's self-perceptions upon both their approach to learning tasks, and upon their academic progress is well documented. Key areas of enquiry include motivation (Burns, 1982; Vroom, 1964), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986), locus of control (Bosworth and Murray, 1983) and learned helplessness (Dweck, 1973). The current review examines self-perceptions within the context of reading development, and particularly reading difficulty. The areas of attribution (Weiner, 1974, 1985, 1986; Abrahamson et al., 1978) and "cognitive errors" (also known as "thinking errors" or "cognitive biases", Beck, 1979) are considered in greater detail.

To investigate whether weak readers are more likely to adopt systematic, negative biases (or cognitive errors) in their self-perceptions compared to more able peers, the current study compared this tendency across the two ability groups. Attributional styles were also compared between these groups, and the relationship between attributional style and the tendency to make cognitive errors was also considered across the ability range. All (n=234), Year 8 (aged 12 – 13) pupils within one mainstream high school completed two questionnaires, one measuring cognitive errors (CNCEQ) and one measuring patterns of attribution (CASQ-R). Existing information from within-school screening was used to categorise readers as either weak or able.

Results indicated non-significant trends in the direction expected, with weak readers showing higher CNCEQ scores (indicating increased tendency to make cognitive errors) and lower or "depressed" CASQ-R scores, compared to their more able peers. Mann Whitney U tests showed this difference to be significant for the "academic" subscale of the CNCEQ, indicating that weak readers are negatively biased in their perceptions of academic situations. As this negative bias presents a likely barrier to learning, acknowledging, identifying and tackling these unhelpful perceptions is recommended.

Educational Psychology & Specialist Support

2 Carrow House
301 King Street
Norwich
NR1 2TN

Phone: 01603 307550

Website: norfolkepss.org.uk



For further information about this research please contact: Dr Ian Mann (ian.mann@norfolk.gov.uk)
